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WAVES OF DESTINY

MARGARET PEDLER

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2006

By

MARGARET PEDLER

WAVES OF DESTINY

THE BARBARIAN LOVER

THE VISION OF DESIRE

THE MOON OUT OF REACH

THE LAMP OF FATE

THE SPLENDID FOLLY

THE HERMIT OF FAR END

THE HOUSE OF DREAMS-COME-TRUE

NEW YORK:
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

WAVES OF DESTINY

BY

MARGARET PEDLER

"A Wave of the great waves of Destiny,
Convulsed at a checked impulse of the heart."

—GEORGE MEREDITH

NEW YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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WAVES OF DESTINY

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WAVES OF DESTINY

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CHAPTER I

MRS. CARRINGTON'S LAST CHANCE

1

IT began in the easiest and most natural way in the world.

Billy had pulled up in the middle of the pavement to light a cigarette, and at the same moment a big collie, racing hell-for-leather in agonised pursuit of a vanished owner, bounded past him, knocking one of his crutches from under the boy's arm.

Precisely as the accident occurred, Mrs. Carrington was coming strollingly out of a draper's shop with her characteristic air of exquisite detachment.

The crutch fell with a clatter at her feet and Billy, flung off his balance, lurched towards her. In an instant her small, strong hand was beneath his elbow, steadying him, and he found himself looking into a pair of melting, hyacinth-blue eyes—"the stunningest eyes in the world," as he told himself later on when, in the privacy of his hotel bedroom, he was able to reassemble his faculties of discrimination and comparison.

"Can you manage for a moment?" asked a satin-soft voice.

That and her aloof little air of detachment were Madeline Carrington's two biggest assets, neither being commonly associated with the predatory type of woman.

With the aid of his remaining crutch Billy propped him-

self securely while Mrs. Carrington stooped swiftly and picked up the one which had fallen, slipping it beneath his arm with a quiet deftness that bespoke experience.

"I say—thanks most awfully! How prompt you were!"

His blue eyes shining, Billy blurted out his gratitude. Mrs. Carrington laughed. Her laugh was charming—a little flute-like sound like the note of a bird.

"You learn to be prompt when you've done two years' nursing in France," she replied.

"Did you do that?" asked Billy. "How topping of you!" warmly.

Of course, hundreds of other women had done as much and more during those four ghastly years of war, but Billy forgot them all for the moment, and was only conscious of the "toppingness" of one individual woman who had done it.

To Madeline Carrington, her two years' war nursing had chiefly represented its equivalent in board and lodging with an added value of possible matrimonial opportunities.

She was thirty-seven—although she contrived to look considerably less—and the chances of acquiring a satisfactory settlement in life by way of a second marriage meant a good deal to her. She had been left a widow with an income altogether inadequate to the extravagances of life, and for the last five or six years she had supplemented it in various ways which had not precisely added to her reputation.

Not that any one had any definite charge to bring against her. But odd stories floated about, and Mrs. Carrington was variously credited with a partiality for high stakes at auction, and with a tendency towards flirtations that strained even the elastic limits of post-war convention. It was whispered that she was quite willing to dine and dance nightly at the expense of any man friend who was prepared to foot the bill, and that if he were willing to include the settlement of an overdue milliner's or dressmaker's account, why, so much the better.

Watchful mothers carefully shepherded their sons away

from her vicinity, and the lists of one or two hostesses showed an irrevocable line scored through her name.

For the rest, Mrs. Carrington clung on desperately to the fringe of society, and confronted the world with a sweet, enigmatic smile. But there were moments—tense, panicky moments—when to herself she admitted the bitter truth. She had invariably just failed to secure her footing. Unless she could make good by a successful marriage she was destined to remain always on society's outskirts—a precarious hanger-on, barely able to scrape along. And the years simply raced!

Only she herself knew how she envied "those others"! Those women with assured positions—and assured incomes—whom she sometimes watched from the window of her tiny, roof-high flat as they slid by in their cars, with their unshakable poise bred of the knowledge that no doors were closed against them.

When the war came she had rushed into every kind of war-work that might seem to promise the unlatching of those doors. But the women who readily availed themselves of her brains and energy showed an equal readiness to forget her existence socially. She was quietly "dropped" when the need for her services was over.

Finally, she had turned her attention to nursing. But somehow or other she had failed to achieve matrimony. With war romances blossoming into marriage all around her, she had still been unlucky. The officers to whom it had been her lot to minister had proved to be either impecunious subalterns —who had adored her—or else, if more profusely blessed with this world's goods, they were always happily married, and had written home to their wives not to worry, "as Sister was the kindest and cleverest nurse a fellow could have." All of which, to Mrs. Carrington's credit be it said, was perfectly true.

And now a trifling accident had suddenly opened the way to new possibilities. The look of fervent admiration in Billy's honest eyes told her that.

She knew who he was quite well—the Honourable Billy Bethune, Lord Rainault's only son, and he was stopping at Sandbeach at the same hotel as herself, alone with his valet. Mrs. Carrington generally made it her business to know who were the men at any hotel where she might be staying, more particularly if they were unattended by their womenkind.

It seemed quite natural, after she had helped him, that she and Billy should stroll on together. They were both going in the same direction.

"Not a relic of the war, I hope?" she asked gently, indicating his crutches.

He shook his head.

"Oh, no. I smashed my foot up a bit playin' polo. Three of us came down in a heap together, and I got rather knocked about generally, so the doctor-man buzzed me off here to recruit. Sea-breezes and all that, you know."

Mrs. Carrington nodded.

"Sandbeach is a nice little place," she said simply. "You're staying at my hotel, aren't you? The Royal."

"Yes, I'm at the Royal. But are you there, too? How could I have missed seeing you?"

His eyes, resting ardently on the dark-red hair that flamed beneath her hat, framing her small, distinctive face, sufficiently explained the naïve astonishment in his tones.

Mrs. Carrington laughed a little.

"Oh, I'm not very noticeable. I'm a very quiet person, you see. And I don't know any one down here."

"Nor do I," said Billy. He paused. After a moment he went on with some embarrassment: "I say, if—if you're really alone—like me—would you think it awful cheek of me to suggest that we might foregather a bit? Of course"—quickly—"I know it would be frightfully dull for you, 'cos I can't *do* anything."

"I don't 'do' things either, I'm afraid," she answered. "And it's a bit lonely sometimes by oneself, isn't it?"

"'M. That's what I meant. We might watch the tennis

tournaments together. You keen on tennis?" She nodded. "Good! And perhaps—now and then, you know—you might let me dine at your table."

Mrs. Carrington assented with a simple graciousness that was entirely disarming. She showed no eagerness—nothing beyond the pleasant acquiescence of a woman who, having no immediate claims upon her time, is good-naturedly willing to make the idle days pass less forlornly for some one else.

So she and the Honourable Billy Bethune were seen in company at the tennis courts quite frequently. Sometimes they drove together. And the occasional sharing of the same table at meal times grew to be a daily custom.

The result was soon regarded as a foregone conclusion by observant people at the hotel. Even Mrs. Carrington herself began to feel a certain confidence in it. But she was experienced enough to know that even a boy of Billy's age—three-and-twenty at the most—isn't safely landed until he has let the word "marriage" slip between his lips.

There had been one ghastly moment when she had thought it was all up with her chances. That was when Billy, fumbling in his pocket-book for the snap-shot of a favourite polo-pony which he wanted to show her, had flicked out the portrait of a girl. It had fluttered to the ground between them, and Madeline, as she picked it up and handed it back to him, had met his embarrassed glance fair and square. There had been no curiosity in her own. She had preserved that delicate aloofness of hers intact while Billy, his cheeks reddening, had rushed into flurried explanation.

"Oh, that's a girl I know. Gave it me last time I went to France. Didn't know it was still there."

He hesitated, looking anxiously at Mrs. Carrington. She leaned forward.

"May I look? Is she—*the* girl, Billy?"

"Oh, no. There's—nothing like that." He stumbled rather badly over it, because a month ago there *had* been something very like that. Matters had not gone quite so far

as an actual understanding between him and the girl in the photo—at least, not the kind of understanding that had crystallised in words—but news of Billy's engagement to any one but herself would certainly have come as a considerable surprise to little Anne Seton.

Madeline examined the photo in silence. It was very young—the face that looked back at her out of the worn leather case—young and brave, with clear, steady, direct eyes, and a mouth that curled up deliciously at the corners.

"She is very pretty," she observed as she relinquished the case into Billy's outstretched hand. She admitted the fact quite freely. She was too clever a woman to refuse to recognise another woman's charm when she saw it.

"Pretty? Oh, I dunno." Billy stuffed the case back in his pocket. "But she's not a bad kid, isn't Anne. A real little sport. Game as you like."

If Billy suffered from any subsequent prickings of conscience, he stifled them successfully. Anne Seton's name was never mentioned again in the days that followed, and Mrs. Carrington's demeanour remained unaltered—serenely friendly, with just an occasional responsive flickering of something warmer. And then one day the inevitable happened.

They had been strolling along the shore together, and had finally established themselves in the shelter of a big rock—Billy perched on a shelving spur, his game leg stretched carefully out in front of him, and Mrs. Carrington sitting on the sand at his side, her slim hands clasped round her knees.

There was no one else in sight. They were alone, with just the blue sea and the golden sand and the fragrant afternoon warmth. The sound of the sea murmuring among the scattered rocks on the shore came to their ears with an intimate little suggestion of their solitude, seeming to set the rest of the world very far away.

Madeline had taken off her hat, tossing it on to the ground beside her, and her coppery hair glowed with a red, slum-

berous fire in the blazing sunlight. Billy's gaze was bent on it worshipfully. Suddenly, with a stifled exclamation, he stooped and laid his cheek impulsively against it. The sun-warmed sweetness of it sent his heart thudding crazily against his ribs. Madeline turned her head slowly and looked up at him.

"I had to! I couldn't help it!" The words came tumbling out from the boy's lips—awkward and blunt in their impetuous honesty. "Madeline! Sweetest! I love you! I—Oh, I want you!"

He drew her close to him with quick, enfolding arms.

"Have I a chance, Madeline? Have I?"

The whole clean soul of him looked at her out of his blue eyes, and suddenly her knowledge of the years between them, of his unthinking youth and her experience, slashed across her consciousness. Every decent instinct in her forbade her taking what he offered. Impulsively she drew away, her body stiffening a little in his eager clasp.

Though she had not spoken, he sensed the significance of her recoil.

"Don't say no!" he exclaimed sharply, his young voice roughening. "Don't say no!"

"Billy boy, I ought to say—just that!" Mrs. Carrington spoke very quietly. Her eyes looked sad.

"*Why* ought you?" he demanded hotly.

"Why? Oh, Billy, it's so obvious, isn't it? A man may not marry his grandmother!" She laughed a little, but the laugh broke in her throat, ending on a sudden hoarse note.

"'Grandmother'? What on earth are you talking about? Suppose I *am* twenty-three and you're—thirty. What then? My four years at the front more than equal the odd seven between us, I should think!"—with a grim reminiscence in his tones.

She was silent. She had made her effort, reminded Billy of the gulf of years between them, and he had bridged it triumphantly. Even honour could demand no more of her.

And Billy represented everything in the world she most craved for—wealth, an assured position, and the headlong, uncritical devotion that only a boy would ever offer her. In all probability he also represented her last chance. The gulf was wider than he guessed by seven years.

Her eyes hardened. For a moment a ridiculous scruple had nearly made her throw away this glorious chance. She almost laughed. She was not a woman who could afford to have scruples. They were a privilege for the well-endowed, not for the Madeline Carringtons of the world.

When at last she spoke it was still to raise objections, but the quality of her voice had altered. There was a note of yielding in it.

"But your people, Billy? What would Lady Rainault say?"

"She'll love you nearly as much as I do when she knows you," he protested valiantly. "Say you'll marry me, darling!"

"And you're sure—quite sure—you want me?"

"I'm sure I can't live without you! That's about the size of it."

"Then, if you're really sure——"

But the sentence was never finished. Billy's eager mouth on hers quenched it, and the grip of his strong young arms about her made Mrs. Carrington almost forget for the moment that she had just concluded an excellent bargain from a worldly point of view, and remember only that Billy loved her very much, and that something within her stirred oddly in answer to that love.

2

"My dear! Did you say—Mrs. Carrington? Madeline Carrington?"

Lady Rainault's well-bred voice did not rise the fraction of a tone above its normal quiet level, yet something in her

utterance of the other woman's name, a delicately faint inflection, seemed to set Mrs. Carrington down in some side street—the sort of side street in which no one would care to be seen.

Billy detected it, and reddened defiantly.

"Yes. Madeline Carrington," he returned shortly.

The golden weeks at Sandbeach were over at last and Billy had returned to town, though Mrs. Carrington had elected to stay a little longer by the sea.

It was very typical of her that she had refrained from following him back to London. Few women in her position would have had the confidence to hold him on so slack a rein or the strength of will to triumph over all the fears and apprehensions which beset her when he spoke of going.

She knew she was risking the adverse influences which would certainly be brought to bear on him when he rejoined his people. But she banked on Billy's being sufficiently in love with her to resist all opposition to their marriage. If he were, she felt sure that rather than suffer anything which savoured of a scandal, rather than be pitied and condoled with by their friends over "dear Billy's unfortunate marriage," the Rainaults would bow to fate with as good a grace as they could simulate. They would tolerate her, outwardly accept her. And with them behind her—however unwillingly behind!—she knew that her position would be unassailable.

So Mrs. Carrington waited quietly at Sandbeach.

Billy had found it more difficult to broach the subject of his engagement than he had anticipated. The first week or two after his return he had been very much under his doctor's orders, and when at last his crutches were discarded in favour of a stick and a temporary limp, his mother had celebrated the occasion by a little dinner at the Ritz to which Anne Seton had been bidden.

Anne, looking very sweet and young in one of "Minetta's" simplest and most expensive little frocks, had welcomed him back to London with a shy, frank pleasure that was rather

disturbing. There had been even a tiny proprietary touch about her greeting—that elusive little royal air which invests a woman, no matter her age, when she knows that *the* man is in love with her.

Billy enjoyed it, enjoyed it so much that it frightened him. More than once during the evening, as he met the dear, candid gaze of Anne's grey eyes, he had to remind himself that he was engaged—engaged to Mrs. Carrington. And that queer, incomprehensible mingling of fright and elation drove him the next morning into announcing his engagement to his mother.

Lady Rainault's reception of the news had not been encouraging. To embolden himself he reiterated the information more firmly.

"Yes. Mrs. Carrington and I are engaged to be married."

For a moment his mother made no response. When finally she did, it took a totally unexpected form.

"She is a very beautiful woman," she said quietly.

Billy felt inadequate. He had been expecting opposition and was prepared to fight it. But this calmly uttered tribute left him feeling somehow weaponless.

Lady Rainault looked across at him and smiled.

"Why, Billy," she said. "You didn't suppose I'd be stupid enough to pretend she wasn't, did you?"

"Some women would have done," returned Billy doggedly. "But you'd never need to be jealous of another woman's good looks, mater."

Lady Rainault kept her eyes fixed upon the blotting-pad lying on the desk in front of her.

"And yet we must be about the same age—Mrs. Carrington and I." She looked up suddenly, her direct glance meeting her son's. "I don't think I want a beautiful daughter-in-law about three years younger than myself, Billy."

He sprang to his feet, outraged, protesting volubly. His mother shook her head.

"I'm right, Billy boy. Madeline Carrington is very much nearer forty than thirty."

"She may be"—stubbornly. "I haven't asked her age. I asked her if she loved me. And she does!"

"Do you think she'd love you quite so much if you weren't Lord Rainault's son with—presumably—plenty of money?"

"I'm sure of it"—warmly. "Madeline isn't just out to catch a fortune." His voice softened as he added: "She's damned lonely."

Somehow in the discussion that followed Lady Rainault managed to keep all bitterness out of it. Very quietly and composedly she sketched a picture of Mrs. Carrington as she appeared in the eyes of the world at large, watching, as she did so, the boy's face whiten into a mute, defiant misery. It ended, as such discussions almost invariably do end, in his valiantly championing the woman he had asked to be his wife.

"If what you say is true, it's all the more reason why I should marry her and give her a little happiness at last," he flared. "I couldn't let her down now even—even if I *didn't* care for her. She's never had a dog's chance. She only wants to be looked after, and protected, and made happy—like our own women are."

Lady Rainault observed the distinction so unconsciously emphasised and smiled a little to herself. Billy did not see the smile, but he flung down his last card triumphantly. "As you say, marriage means *everything* to her."

A long silence ensued.

"I wish—I wish your father were back from India," Lady Rainault said presently, a note of wistfulness in her voice.

"Why? He wouldn't make me give her up—if that's what you mean!"—with quick defiance.

Another silence followed. Lady Rainault was rapidly weighing values. She realised that further opposition would only serve to strengthen the boy's determination.

"Well?" he demanded at last with a certain nervous belligerence. "What are you going to say about it?"

She rose and came quickly across the room to where he stood staring moodily out of the window.

"It needs thinking over," she said simply. "I don't think I want to say anything just now, Billy, except that you know I love you and that your happiness—yours and your father's—means more to me than anything in the world."

He swung round and, catching up her slim, still girlish figure in his arms, gave her a great schoolboy hug. Somehow the spontaneous, clumsy, boyish clasp seemed to loosen the band that had been tightening apprehensively about her heart. For all his six feet and his love affair with a woman whose reputation was patched with grey, he was still just her "little boy" to the eternal mother.

3

Mrs. Carrington's flat was perched on the top floor, and the services of a lift were not included amongst the advantages offered by the landlord.

Lady Rainault climbed the steep stone stairway with lagging feet. She was in no hurry to reach the top. She frankly dreaded the forthcoming interview with the woman who, as the matter involuntarily phrased itself in her own mind, had trapped her son into an offer of marriage. Had her husband been home she would, of course, have left it to him to arrange the affair. Men were more used to buying their way out of difficulties, she reflected ruefully.

But since Lord Rainault was still occupied with certain Governmental duties in India, and since Mrs. Carrington had returned to London and was already monopolising two-thirds of Billy's time and the whole of his thoughts, his mother had taken her courage in both hands to seek an interview with her.

A diminutive maid opened the door of the flat in response

to her ring, and a minute later Lady Rainault found herself trying to gather from the room into which she was shown some impression of the woman she had come to see. There was nothing in the furnishings at which she could cavil. It was all very modern but in quite good taste. Yet to the woman who was straining to draw from it some clue as to its owner's personality, the whole effect of the room failed to ring true. It was as though, knowing that this or that was considered the right thing, its occupant had promptly acquired it and substituted it for something that would more nearly have expressed her own individuality. With a sigh Lady Rainault relinquished her attempt to make the room yield up its secret, and at the same moment the door opened to admit Mrs. Carrington.

She came in very quietly. Her dress was almost Quakerish in its simplicity, but here, too, Lady Rainault received the impression of a striving after effect. Simplicity was not the key-note of Mrs. Carrington's character. Her red hair flamed denial. But the expression in the hyacinth-blue eyes was genuine enough. It asked apprehensively: "Have you come here as a friend or as an enemy?" And Lady Rainault, conscious of a sudden twinge of pity for the woman before her, answered the unspoken question swiftly.

"No. I'm afraid you must not regard this as a friendly visit, Mrs. Carrington."

The other made no attempt to misunderstand her meaning. Some women would have simulated ignorance, but Madeline Carrington never wasted time or energy on futilities. If it was to be war, then let it be war to the knife and at once.

"So you disapprove of my engagement to your son?" she said, speaking as quietly as her visitor.

"Could you expect me to do otherwise?" returned Lady Rainault. "I am very sorry, but neither my husband nor I could possibly give our sanction to it."

"Why not?" At least, Billy's mother should be forced out into the open.

"The disparity between your ages is surely sufficient reason."

"Oh, no, it isn't!" The composed parrying of her attack broke through Mrs. Carrington's guard of cool aloofness and something faintly common—a suggestion of the woman who lives by her wits—showed itself in the smartly-uttered contradiction.

"Plenty of women marry men younger than themselves," she went on. "Is that your only reason?"

"You know it is not," answered Lady Rainault quietly. "Mrs. Carrington, need I go into details? You and I both know that there are a hundred reasons why you are an unsuitable wife for my son. Won't you just accept the fact that I can't consent to an engagement between you?"

"I suppose"—bluntly—"you think I'm not good enough?"

"I *know* you are not. And you know it, too. You'd spoil his life. He's young, and you're very beautiful—and he thinks he's in love with you. But he isn't really. He'd find it out as soon as you were married——"

"No, he wouldn't. He does love me! I tell you, he does!"

Lady Rainault made no answer. Something in her silence dragged an unwilling question from the other.

"Is there some one else?" She was thinking of the girl in the photo.

"Yes, I think there is. Though I'm not quite sure"—simply—"that Billy realises it. You've dazzled him, you see."

"And I'm going to marry him. What's more, you can't stop me. He's over age"—triumphantly.

"True. He's over age. But he's not independent of his father financially."

The significance of Lady Rainault's reply shattered Mrs. Carrington's last shred of self-control. That clever assumption of aloofness which had so often successfully passed mus-

ter, where she was unknown, as the quiet detachment of a woman of unquestionable status, went with it.

"Then, if that's the case," she flung back, "Lord Rainault would either have to *make* him independent or stand the racket of a breach of promise case. I've plenty of Billy's letters," she added meaningly.

"There is still another alternative," replied Lady Rainault. She nerved herself to speak what she had really come to say. "I want you to release my son. How much would you consider reasonable compensation?"

Madeline Carrington thought rapidly. She could guess what lay at the back of the offer. The Rainaults were as proud as Lucifer and they funked a breach of promise case. Rather would they face the fact of her marriage with Billy and cloak their disapproval in the eyes of the world by seeming to accept her. The trump cards were all in her hands. She didn't want merely money. She wanted that—and everything else that marriage with Billy represented.

Lady Rainault misread her silence.

"I know, of course," she continued, "that in releasing my son you would sacrifice certain financial security, and I am prepared to make this up to you. Would a cheque for three thousand pounds——"

She stopped, checked by the sudden strained expression in the other woman's face.

"Of course you think it's only a question of money?" Mrs. Carrington burst out vehemently. "You don't understand! How should you? You've always had all the things I've missed. You *couldn't* understand!"

Lady Rainault stared at her in bewilderment.

"The things you've missed?" she repeated.

"Yes. You've always been cared for"—with gathering intensity. "I haven't! I've had to fight for my own hand. Everything that came to you naturally, luxury and position and a good time, I've had to *get*—by angling for it. I'm

sick of angling, sick of pretending! I want the *real thing*. And Billy can give it me. I've never had anything—never! I've always been on the edge. Oh, I know what people say—I'm an outsider. Well, they won't be able to say it any longer. If I marry Billy, you—and people like you—will have to accept me whether they want to or not!"

"Yes"—gravely. "I—we should have to accept you. I grant that."

"Very well," retorted Mrs. Carrington triumphantly. "You can't expect me to give all that up."

"No, I suppose I can't," replied Lady Rainault very slowly. "Unless—you care for him."

The five short words dropped into a silence—sudden and tense. Mrs. Carrington drew back a pace and stood a little away from the older woman, staring at her with a curiously awakened expression.

There was something startled and bewildered, almost shy, in the hyacinth eyes. It invested her, this woman of the world—and a somewhat shady world at that—with an atmosphere that was at once elusive and sweet and virginal. Billy's mother, watching the transformation, could imagine what she must have been like as a young girl.

"I—I do care!" The words came jerkily. "I didn't know it before. But—I do care!"

And looking into the other's beautiful face, pale in the grip of a sudden intensity of emotion, Lady Rainault realised that she spoke the naked truth.

But it could make no difference. Whether she loved him or loved only all that he could give her, this woman was no wife for her son. She spoke inexorably.

"Then, if you care, give him up!"

Mrs. Carrington drew in her breath sharply.

"I can't!" she muttered in a stifled voice. "I can't give him up."

Almost as though her legs would no longer support her she sank down into a chair and stared dumbly at Billy's

mother. When Lady Rainault spoke again, it was rather sorrowfully.

"If you love him, you'll give him up. Just because you do love him. And, if you're brave enough, you'll send him away from you—without any regrets that he has to go."

The door closed quietly behind her. Madeline Carrington sat huddled in her chair, Lady Rainault's last words beating in her brain like a pulse: *"Send him away from you—without any regrets that he has to go."*

"Oh, I can't! . . . I can't!" she whispered hoarsely.

4

Love's eyes are very clear. In the days which followed Madeline Carrington could see that Billy was already chafing against the bonds which held him, although he was gamely refusing to recognise the fact, every instinct of his boy's honour alert to conceal it from her. She set her teeth and tried not to recognise the bitter truth, but it jumped out and mocked at her a dozen times in as many days.

Sometimes she would test him.

"I'm too old for you, Billy," she said one day, watching restlessly under her white lids for the old indignation to leap into his eyes, eagerly listening for the headlong denial. The denial came, but it lacked conviction.

"Of course you're not," said Billy. "I wish you wouldn't keep harping on the subject of age."

The crisis came one evening at the Gloria Restaurant. They were dining there together and at first he had appeared to be enjoying himself much as usual. But all at once he grew fidgety and his attention wandered. The alteration in his manner synchronised with the arrival of a party of friends who took possession of a table near at hand, and Mrs. Carrington, following the direction of Billy's nervously roving glance, recognised in one of the new-comers the girl whose photo he had had with him at Sandbeach.

There was no mistaking the pure, childish oval of her face with its wide-open, fearless eyes. And if there could have been a doubt it was dispelled an instant later when, meeting Billy's eyes, she nodded and smiled across at him.

Then her glance passed on from Billy to his companion. The smile died abruptly on her lips as though it had been wiped off and she turned aside. But, before she turned, her young, hard summing-up of the older woman was visible in the suddenly aloof expression of her eyes.

Mrs. Carrington exerted herself to be even more charming and entertaining than usual, desperately striving to regain and hold Billy's attention so that his thoughts might not linger about the girl at that other table. Linger about her and—compare!

But it was uphill work, and as they drove back to her flat, Madeline, leaning back silently in the darkness of the taxi, knew that she was holding fast to the mere letter of the pledge between them. The spirit of it was dead.

"Coming in for a smoke?" she asked as Billy helped her out of the taxi.

"Not to-night." Then, catching sight of her face in the light of the street-lamps, he went on hurriedly: "Oh, very well, then. Just one."

They climbed the long flights of stairs almost in silence. Arrived at the flat, she established him in a big easy chair and held a match while he lit his cigarette, fussing round him in a way that was quite foreign to her usual custom.

"You're very attentive," he commented, with a puzzled little smile. "Why am I being so spoilt to-night?"

She had been moving restlessly about the room. Now she came back and stood in front of him on the hearth.

"Perhaps—because—it's our last evening together."

Billy's cigarette dropped from his fingers to the floor. He stooped and picked it up.

"Our last night!" he repeated stupidly. "What do you mean?"

"Would you be very sorry?" she asked, evading the question. "You wouldn't really, Billy. I'm too old for you."

"That's my business, isn't it?" he said quickly. "If I care for you——"

"But you don't!" she interrupted. "You're in love with—Anne Seton."

He sprang to his feet.

"Madeline! I've given you no right to say that!"

"Except the right of observation"—dryly. "I saw you look at her to-night—at the Gloria——"

"Suppose we leave Anne Seton's name out of this discussion," said Billy, his boyish voice suddenly cold. "I don't understand what's the matter with you to-night, Madeline."

"Nothing. Only—only I don't believe you want to marry me now, Billy. You'd rather not. You'd like to get out of it."

In a minute he was on fire, his young pride scraped raw to the quick, denying, reassuring. She had touched him on a point of honour—that clean, untarnished honour so dear to a boy of twenty-three.

All that he knew of the woman he had asked to be his wife, all that his mother had told him, only urged him into more vehement determination to keep his pledge—to lift her out of her shoddy life of makeshifts and pretence. It was all very young and staunch, and not a little touching.

But his face betrayed him. She could read the truth in his half-shamed, half-defiant eyes. He did not care any longer. But he was going to play the game, whatever it cost.

"Oh, go! . . . Go!" she exclaimed violently. Then, as he turned away impetuously, she caught him back to her, pulling his face down to hers.

"No! Don't go, Billy!" she cried in frightened, breathless tones. "I didn't mean it. Kiss me! . . . Kiss me!"

When he was gone he left her secure in the knowledge that

he would never claim his release, would not even accept it when she almost flung it at him. She could take him if she chose—or send him away and give him the freedom of which he was too young and too hot-headed to recognise the value. But if it was to be a gift—love's gift—he must go gladly, without regrets.

Feverishly she snatched up a pen and began to write.

Dear Billy—her pen jerked along—*We've had our last evening together. Fond as I am of you, I'm not fool enough to believe we could live on love and kisses, and I've found out that you've only an allowance which might be cut off any old time your father felt inclined. So we'll call it off. You'll understand, won't you?*

Yours, Madeline.

She caught up a wrap and went slowly downstairs. A pillar-box stood at the end of the street, like a grey sentinel in the lamp-lit dark. There was a flicker of white as she held the letter poised an instant in her hand, then the grim, black mouth of the pillar-box engulfed it. She remained staring fascinatedly at the blank slit.

"Next clearance twelve midnight," she said tonelessly.

Billy stormed his way to her flat within an hour of the letter's receipt. His face was white and strained, and there was a curious frozen look in his eyes.

"Did you mean this?" he asked. "Just what it says?"

She nodded.

"I'm afraid I did, Billy. I'm sorry. But you see, I'm quite a material person. I'd love to be the Honourable Mrs. Billy, but it looks as though it's a luxury I can't afford." She shrugged her shoulders a little. "So I'll have to content myself with being plain Mrs. Silas Arkwright."

"Arkwright! That bounder!"

"'M. He's gots pots of money, you know. And he likes me quite a lot."

"So you were just out after the money?" he said slowly.

She looked away.

"A woman in my position has to—think of things," she answered.

It hit him hard. He had been so frightfully sorry for her, for the bad luck against which she had put up such a plucky fight—had championed her so fiercely in his eager young chivalry. And now she had revealed herself the rapacious, predatory type just as surely as a woman of the street.

"You're not going to kick up a fuss about it, Billy?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh, no," he said shortly. "I won't queer your pitch with—Silas Arkwright." He laughed suddenly and harshly. "A man doesn't want to marry your kind—if he knows."

"No, I suppose not." She acquiesced with apparent indifference. "Well, good-bye, Billy."

She held out her hand. He looked at it, but made no effort to take it.

"Good-bye," he said, and strode out of the room with his face very white and his heart full of fierce, boyish scorn and bitterness, but—without any regrets.

She sat very still when he had gone, her hands lying idly folded on her knee, her eyes staring into space. She could hear his footsteps as he descended the stone stairway grow fainter and fainter. When the last one had died away into silence she gave a little shivering sigh, like a tired child worn out with crying.

. . . . . .

Six months later Lady Rainault and her daughter-in-law were lunching together at the Gloria Restaurant. Anne was looking radiant—vivid with the triumphant radiance of youth and love.

Her glance flitted interestedly over the crowded room. Presently it was checked and held by a woman lunching with a middle-aged, opulent-looking man at another table—

a slender woman whose red hair flamed in the sunlight. Anne's lips curved into a faint disdain.

"There's that atrocious Mrs. Carrington, with a man of the rich financier type," she observed. "She's rather a dreadful person, isn't she?"

"Is she?" Lady Rainault's quiet eyes rested on the woman at the other table. "I don't know. But I know she is a very brave woman."

CHAPTER II

THE PENALTY

1

THE green of the short grass crowning the cliffs met the blue of a sea which broke into a myriad glancing ripples a hundred feet below. Overhead, the tremulous June sky stretched cloudlessly away to the very edge of the horizon. The little intermittent breeze which brushed the downs carried on its breath the mingled sweetness of summer fragrance, and wafted it at inconsequent moments to the man and woman who were sitting together on the sun-baked turf, their faces seaward.

It was easy to see that they had been picnicking. Some short distance away, where the white road wound like a broad ribbon across the foreland, stood the long grey car which had brought them to this solitary spot, while close beside them an open lunch-basket, long since rifled of its contents, told its own tale.

The silence which enfolded them had lasted a long time. The man was smoking, pulling at his cigarette with quick, nervous puffs, his blue eyes fixed unseeingly on the distant point where sky and sea met and melted into a pearl-grey blur. The line of his jaw was obstinately squared, as though he were mentally confronting some unpleasant fact. Seated a little behind him, so that only his clean-cut profile was visible to her, the woman watched him guardedly, in her eyes a curious mingling of faint amusement and regret. She could make a pretty good guess at his thoughts, and she was wondering how in the world she should answer him when he spoke.

Actually, he was reflecting with what amazing swiftness the weeks had slipped by since that day when, swinging his car sharply aside to avoid a blundering cyclist, it had skidded on the greasy road, climbed the steep bank that hedged it, and turned turtle, flinging him out on to his head in the roadway. After which rapid sequence of events, Anthony, Marquis of Frayne and heir to the dukedom of Carchester, had ceased to take any further interest in the proceedings.

The accident had occurred just outside the little seaside village of Greybourne, immediately in front of the house of one Sutherland, the local doctor, and when, a day or two later, Frayne came back to a confused consciousness of mundane matters, it was to find himself in bed, while the doctor's daughter, home on holiday, filled the post of head nurse with consummate skill—and with a gracious, flower-like charm which would probably have been conspicuously absent from a starched and uniformed professional.

He recalled his first clear recollection of her—slender and pliant as a hazel wand, moving lightly about the room with a curious floating grace that made it sheer delight to watch her. As his strength increased, with masculine cunning he used to devise small jobs for her to execute. He wanted the window a little more widely opened; he would like the flowers she had brought him transferred from the table to the chimney-piece in order that he could see them better, and so on—anything which should compel her to cross the room so that his eyes might follow her as she moved to and fro.

The patternless wall, of some warm brown distemper, made an almost perfect background for her little dark head. There was one particular spot in the room where the sunlight slanted in through a side window, and whenever she passed there it brought the sheen of a raven's wing to her smoothly-banded hair. He used to wait until she happened to cross that spot, and then ask her some entirely unnecessary question in order to detain her there. It was always an even

chance whether she would pass on or would pause to answer him, standing quietly within the patch of sunlight with that wonderful liquid gleam on her hair, and he used to get tremendously excited to see which she would do.

. . . And now it was all over. He and his car were both hopelessly convalescent, and there remained not the smallest reason why he should inflict himself upon the Sutherland household a day longer.

His teeth bit suddenly through his cigarette. With an impatient movement he tossed the half-smoked ragged end over the cliff and turned to the woman beside him.

"Yvonne," he said slowly, "I can't stay here indefinitely. This is one of our last days. Have you realised it?"

"Yes." She bent her head and began plucking with nervous fingers at some sea-pinks growing near where she sat. She had cast aside her hat and the sunlight dwelt caressingly on the raven's-wing hair. He felt a mad impulse to touch it—to feel its sun-warmed, satiny smoothness beneath his hand. He compromised, and laid his strong brown fingers over the slim, restless ones which plucked at the sea-pinks.

"Or—is it one of our first?" She threw a quick, almost frightened glance at him, and he went on recklessly: "Our first day—of 'belonging.' Because we do belong! I'm yours, body and soul. And you?—Oh, beautifullest, you've understood, haven't you?"

"Understood?" Her voice was a mere thread.

"That I love you. Say you care"—his arms went round her, holding her prisoned. "Little *darling* Yvonne, say you care!"

For a moment she seemed to yield, leaning towards him, the flame in his blue eyes kindling an answering flame in the southern dark of hers. Then, with a swift movement, she dragged herself free of him and sprang to her feet.

"No, no!" she cried, stumblingly. "What are you thinking of? You're mad! Lord Frayne——"

"'Lord Frayne'!" he interrupted. "I'm not that—to you, and you know it." Standing beside her, he laughed down at her triumphantly. "I shan't listen to anything you have to say—to 'Lord Frayne.'"

"Tony, then," she conceded reluctantly. "But listen—oh, you must listen! It's just because you *are* Lord Frayne that we can't ever—'belong.'"

"It's just precisely why we can," he returned gaily, catching her back into his arms and holding her more closely. "There's nothing in the wide world to prevent it. Thanks be, my revered ancestors had a positive genius for amassing money, and I can give you everything on earth you want. We can be married to-morrow—or, at least as soon as I can get a special licence!"

She shook her head.

"My dear, don't you realise how impossible it all is? It isn't a question of money. What do you think the Duke of Carchester would say when you presented him with a country doctor's daughter for his future daughter-in-law? Oh, you must see for yourself how impossible it is!"

His brows drew frowningly together.

"I don't see," he returned stubbornly.

"But that's only just because you don't want to," she answered. "Tony, dear, remember I'm a working woman. I'm only home on a short holiday. You can't marry any one like me. It—it's out of the question."

He glanced at her consideringly. The Sutherlands appeared to be quite comfortably blessed with this world's goods. At the same time he had gathered that Yvonne was away from home the greater part of the year, earning her own living somewhere. Delicacy had prevented him from inquiring precisely how she earned it, and neither she nor her father—her mother, it appeared, had been dead some years—had ever volunteered any information on the subject. Probably, he reflected, she held some well-paid position in the City.

"I don't know what you do, darling," he said at last. "But can't you 'give notice' or resign or something?"

She regarded him with a curious expression in her eyes—eyes so sombrely dark that they suggested a strain of Latin blood.

"I might," she answered. "But"—hardly—"do you think your father would exactly welcome into his family a woman who had been employed in a hat-shop?"

Frayne did not flinch beneath the steady glance she levelled at him.

"So that's where you get your charming taste in headgear, is it?" he returned coolly, unmoved. "Well, keep your taste, dear—and drop the hat-shop."

She made a little gesture of impatience.

"Tony, you must be sensible—you must try to understand," she urged desperately.

"There's only one thing I want to understand," he said, his voice deepening to the tenderly imperious note that she loved. "And that is—do you care? Answer me. Yvonne, Yvonne, answer me quickly!"

The passionate demand swept her off her feet. She had tried so hard to convince him—to show him the utter absurdity of any question of marriage between himself and her. Now she shut her eyes to the great gulf which yawned between them—the social gulf than which, no one knew better than she, there is none other so difficult to cross—and surrendered herself to the beautiful madness of the moment.

"Care?" she breathed. "Oh, Tony, do I need to tell you?"

He lifted her against his heart and set his lips to hers, while the sun shone and the sea crooned softly at the cliff foot, and the little vagrant breeze flitted around them, breathing summer incense. And for a space they forget everything except that they were man and woman and loved each other as God had intended they should from the beginning.

2

I've thought it all out, Tony, and—I've run away. It was the only thing to do. You'll forget all about me one day—at least, I hope you will. . . . No, I don't really hope that. I'd like you to remember me sometimes. But do not ever seek to find me—it could bring neither of us any happiness to meet again.

Such was the letter which Frayne found awaiting him the following day when he returned from his morning dip in the sea. He stared down at it blankly. She couldn't have gone—left Greybourne! Why, only an hour or so ago she had been gathering roses in the garden and had waved her hand to him light-heartedly as he set off for the shore! Some of those same roses were standing in a bowl on the table at his elbow. They seemed to nod at him derisively.

She couldn't be gone! He ransacked the whole house, striding dazedly in and out of the rooms. Then he searched the garden. But there was no sign of her. Finally, as he could not bring himself to seek information from the servants, he had perforce to contain his impatience until the doctor came back from paying his daily round of visits. The period of inaction seemed interminable, and when at last Sutherland returned, it was only to confirm the contents of the letter. Yvonne had left Greybourne by the eleven o'clock train that morning.

Eagerly Frayne demanded her address. The doctor shook his head, his kindly grey eyes compassionate.

"I'm afraid if she didn't see fit to give it to you herself, I mustn't betray her whereabouts," he answered.

"But, good heavens, man! I *must* know it—I want to marry her!"

"You're doing us a great honour, Lord Frayne," began Sutherland gravely. "But——"

"Oh, cut that out!" groaned Frayne. "I want to find her. Tell me where she is!"

But Sutherland remained adamant—regretful, kindly, but implacably firm. He could not give Lord Frayne his daughter's address.

"Well, if I write to her, will you forward on the letter?" demanded Frayne at last, finding that persuasion and argument alike proved equally futile.

"Yes," he said. "I'll do that."

So Frayne wrote, a frenzied outpouring, and the letter was duly forwarded. But it brought no response. Neither did two subsequent letters which he dispatched to Greybourne in quick succession after his return to London. It was as though a shutter had descended betwixt him and the woman he loved—blank and impassable. He was as completely cut off from her as if those wonderful weeks by the sea had never been.

Summer passed, and after a round of shooting parties in Scotland, Frayne found himself back once more in London, caught up into the familiar routine of the winter season. His friends noticed an alteration in him. He seemed to be always on guard, vigilantly on the watch for something or some one. Even in the street, they complained, he was oddly absent in his manner, appearing more or less oblivious of whoever might be his companion, while all the time his eyes roved restlessly to and fro amongst the hurrying crowds which thronged the pavements. He was always searching—searching for the face which he had never seen since that last morning at Greybourne—the face of Yvonne. And then, one day, when he had almost given up all hope of ever seeing her again, he found her.

It happened quite by chance. At a big evening crush he ran up against a man he had not seen for some years, who was now part manager of the Diadem Theatre, and who buttonholed him promptly.

"What are you doing to-morrow night, Frayne?" he had

demanded. "Nothing? Then come to the first night of our new show. We've got Mauvigny and her company—the new dancer all Paris has gone wild over."

"Mauvigny? Never heard of her," returned Frayne. "Is she any good?"

"Any good, man? Mark my words, Yvonne Mauvigny is going to sweep the board. Paris has fallen for her, and so will London."

Yvonne! Despite himself, Frayne started violently. It couldn't be the same Yvonne! And yet—the memory of her exquisite grace of movement rushed over him—that curious grace which had so caught and held his attention from the very outset of his acquaintance with her. Rather breathlessly he agreed to attend the first night at the Diadem.

Afterwards it seemed to him that he had known from the first moment he entered the theatre that he would find her there, and when she appeared, supreme amongst a company of superlatively good dancers, he was content for a time to sit quietly watching her from his stall, recapturing every detail of the grace and charm he had loved. She was looking very lovely, the dark hair above her pure little face interwoven with gleaming pearls, while filmy, diaphanous white, sparkling here and there with half-hidden jewels, swathed her shoulders, and billowed away from her slender hips.

Her dancing partner was a young Russian, Ivolski by name, and all at once, as Frayne followed the exquisitely delicate abandon of the dance, he became conscious of a sudden fierce jealousy, a primitive fury that any other man should hold in his arms the woman who was going to be his wife. He had no doubt at all about that latter point. Now that he had found her, he would never let her go again, run no risk of losing her a second time.

At the conclusion of her part in the programme he made his way behind the scenes. Doors opened facilely for the Marquis of Frayne, and in a few minutes he was admitted to her dressing-room.

"Tony!" Even beneath her make-up he could see that she had paled nervously. With a gesture she dismissed her dresser, and turned to face him.

"Why have you come here?" she asked in a frightened voice. "Oh, Tony, why have you come?"

"To the 'hat-shop'?" he returned, quizzically. "To find you, of course. I told you in my last letter—which you didn't answer, by the way—that I should never rest until I'd found you. I meant it."

"And now that you have found me," she said bitterly, "you will understand why I went away. The hat-shop was a myth. I daren't—oh I couldn't tell you the truth! The hat-shop"—with a wan little smile—"seemed at least—respectable!"

"And isn't a dancer respectable?" he demanded teasingly, smiling down at her. His joy at finding her was so great, his feeling of security so sure now that they were together, that he ventured to play with his happiness, to squander a few moments in the glory of anticipation. He never cast a thought to the high gods who might be listening—and laughing at him.

"Oh, yes, dancers are quite respectable—very often," she answered rather wearily. "Only no one ever believes it." She paused. "And now, will you go away, Tony? You've found me, you see what I am, and you know now why I could never be your wife."

"Why shouldn't you be my wife? You've not changed, have you? You're still the same Yvonne—*my* Yvonne!"

She stared at him wonderingly.

"But now—now that you know I'm a dancer, you wouldn't—still—marry me?" she faltered.

"Wouldn't I? Oh, sweet, how little you know of love! Do you think it matters to me what you've been—whether you've run a hat-shop or danced like an angel? . . . Not that!" He snapped his fingers. "All that matters is what you will be—and that's my wife!"

For a moment she gazed at him incredulously. Then, with a little broken cry of utter happiness, she went into his arms, and for a while the sheer ecstasy of reunion blotted out everything else from their minds.

At last, leaning back in his embrace, she looked up at him with a flicker of amusement in her eyes.

"It will be something rather novel, won't it—a dancing duchess?"

He glanced at her swiftly.

"It might be," he said, "if there were to be any such a thing. But, of course"—easily—"you'll give up all that sort of thing when you're my wife."

"Give it up?" she exclaimed. "What do you mean? Why should I give it up?" A sudden note of apprehension sounded in her voice.

He smiled.

"Because—why, sweetest, you must see that you couldn't remain a professional dancer after we're married."

"But you said you didn't mind!" she protested. "You said you didn't mind the fact that I'd been a dancer!"

"That you *had* been," he emphasised gently. "I should mind very much my wife's being a dancer."

"But why—why? Tony, don't you trust me?"

"Trust you? Of course I do—round the world and back again. But darlingest, you must see—surely you realise"—he began to flounder—"that it wouldn't do for the Marchioness of Frayne to be dancing professionally? It wouldn't do, you know," he repeated unhappily. "It—oh, hang it all, Yvonne!—it wouldn't do."

In a flash she tore herself out of his arms.

"Tony, I never knew before that you were a snob!" she cried, her eyes blazing scorn at him.

His face paled a little.

"I'm not," he said, speaking with enforced quietness. "But it would be very undesirable for the future Duchess of Carchester to be dancing in public for the amusement of

every Tom, Dick, and Harry who has the price of a theatre ticket in his pocket! And in your heart you know it as well as I do. Rank has its privileges—but it also has its duties. As I see things, such influence as people in our position have is a special trust, and it's sheer betrayal of that trust to cheapen ourselves so that our influence becomes nil. Don't you understand, Yvonne?"—gravely. "Dear, to give up dancing in public is one of the penalties you'll have to pay—for love. Is it too heavy a one?"

She was silent for a moment. Within herself she realised the bed-rock truth of every word he had uttered. But her whole being cried out against the sacrifice demanded of her.

"Yes, it's too heavy!" she burst out at last. "Tony, it's in my very blood to dance—I couldn't give it up! My mother was a dancer before she married—a French dancer. Mauvigny, the name I'm known by professionally, was her maiden name. She gave it all up to marry my father—to go and be buried alive in a poky little country hole like Greybourne, and she regretted it, longed to go back to the stage, till the day of her death. . . . And it would be the same with me. I can't give it up! I can't—not even to marry you!"

"Then you don't love me!" he flung back. The control he had been exerting snapped suddenly, and his anger and scorn poured over her in a surging torrent. He was too hurt, too bitterly hurt and angry to measure his words. But with each contemptuous, biting phrase he uttered her determination hardened.

"Stop! That's enough!" she interrupted passionately. "I can't and won't give it up. I quite see"—with a bitter sneer—"that a—a future duchess's legs must be concealed. So I'll resign from the honour you're proposing to do me by making me your wife."

Frayne looked at her. His eyes were hard, but behind their hardness lay an infinite pain.

"Do you mean that?" he asked.

"Yes, I do mean it," she returned swiftly. "And now, will you go, please. I want to dress." She turned conclusively to the mirror.

"Yvonne——" he began.

"Please go," she repeated, without looking round.

For a moment he hesitated. Then, without another word, he turned on his heel and left the room.

3

Christmas found Yvonne back at Greybourne for a brief rest following upon the conclusion of her engagement at the Diadem. Very briefly she confided to her father the upshot of her meeting with Frayne in London. They understood each other very well, these two, and Sutherland received the news without protest.

"It was asking too much of me—to give up dancing," she informed him. But there was an interrogative note in her voice, an unuttered appeal to his judgment, and he answered that.

"Then, my dear, that settles the matter, doesn't it?" he said quietly. "If either man or woman can apply the words 'too much' to anything they are asked to do for the sake of love, that love isn't of good enough quality to withstand the wear and tear of everyday life. And you're wiser to cut it out of your scheme of things."

"Then you think I was right—that I decided wisely?" she persisted, conscious of a curious inner need for reassurance.

He regarded her with an enigmatical expression in his grey eyes.

"Only time can tell you that," he answered.

Emphatically the holiday at Greybourne was not a success. Every nook and corner served to remind her of the man she had loved and sent away, to recall those perfect weeks they had spent together there, drifting carelessly with

the tide, without a thought of the hard and difficult choice which was destined to be the ultimate outcome of it all. Once she sought the cliffs where they had picnicked. But the sea-pinks were withered and dead, the voiceless solitude seemed to mock her, and the agony of remembrance which overwhelmed her was more than she could bear. She turned and fled from the place.

She was thankful when at last her holiday drew to an end and she quitted Greybourne *en route* for London. She was about to leave England on a world tour, and it would be at least two years before she returned. At Victoria she bought a newspaper and, unfolding it as the train steamed out of the station, her glance fell on a brief paragraph included amongst the items of social news. Her eyes raced down the few lines:

> "The Duke of Carchester is lying dangerously ill at Carchester Towers, and is not expected to recover. Two doctors are in attendance . . . in their opinion it is now only a question of hours. . . ."

Her hand closed convulsively on the paper, crushing it together with the tensity of her grip. So a few hours would convert Tony into the next Duke of Carchester, setting him definitely and for ever outside her world! The wall between them would have risen so high as to be almost unscalable.

A short time afterwards she stood on the deck of the cross-Channel steamer and watched the white cliffs of Dover recede into the distance with eyes that held a strange intermingling of emotion.

. . . . . .

In succession to the world tour Yvonne received the offer of several other important engagements, so that it was three years instead of two before she was able to contemplate returning home. The end of those three years found her in

Paris, concluding an engagement there, and just as one paragraph in the newspapers had sent her out of England feeling that a door had been closed in her face, shutting off all the shining possibilities of happiness which had been hers, so now another item of news sufficed to doubly lock and bolt that same door. In an illustrated weekly, devoted principally to chronicling the doings of society folk, she came across a full-page portrait of a woman bending above an elaborately robed baby. Underneath ran a couple of explanatory lines of print:

"The lovely young Duchess of Carchester, formerly Lady Hermione Dykeland, and her little son."

Then Tony was married! As Yvonne pored over the beautiful pictured face, dully trying to realise the fact, she felt as though everything in life that mattered had come to an end. There, facing her, was the presentment of the woman whom Tony had made his wife, had set in the place which, but for her refusal to give up her profession, might have been hers. And this woman was now the mother of his child!

Yvonne knew now what she had done. She had cast aside the substance for the shadow. In her feverish pursuit of fame she had thrown away all the most wonderful gifts of life. And now that she had actually accomplished her desire and become world-famous, what did it all amount to? A handful of so-called friends—whose friendship, incidentally, had never been proved by the hard testing of adversity—staring head-lines in the papers, unlimited applause and fêting. Weighed up as the sum total of a life's happiness it seemed of very little worth compared with the wifehood and motherhood of this other woman. In that hour of passionate realisation Yvonne went down into the depths and the waters of bitterness closed over her head.

That night, at the crowded Paris theatre where she was performing, she danced carelessly, absorbed in her own

thoughts. Once, twice, she almost missed Ivolski's hand outstretched to swing her up into one of those beautiful and difficult poses for which the two dancers had become famous. The second time it occurred the Russian's lean young face beaded with the perspiration of sudden fear.

"*Mais, mon dieu, Yvonne!* Take care!" he had whispered hurriedly. "Of what are you thinking to-night?"

She broke from his clasp mechanically as the dance proceeded, and, warned by that tense look of anxiety in his eyes, forced herself to think coherently of the work in hand. The last phase of the dance called for the full perfection of her technique. From the centre of the stage scene a stairway conducted to a gallery above, and the action of the dance—which was supposed to be taking place in an ante-room during the course of a fancy dress ball—demanded that Yvonne, in the character of a Columbine, should escape up this staircase, pursued by Ivolski as Pierrot. At the top of the stairs he catches her and bears her away aloft on his shoulder.

Usually this scene provoked a thunder of applause, Yvonne's pose as she lay across the Pierrot's shoulder being a pure triumph of art and feather-light grace. But to-night, exactly as she reached the top of the staircase and turned with mischievous, smiling lips and outstretched arms to ward off her pursuer, her expression changed, and her glance grew suddenly fixed. From amid the blur of faces in the auditorium below one face seemed to leap out at her with terrible and startling clarity—Tony's face! He was down there—amongst the audience!

She hesitated only an instant, disconcerted by that sudden recognition of the man who had once meant so much to her. But that instant brought catastrophe. When she sprang to clasp Ivolski's outstretched hands, she missed her grip, and instead of seeming almost to float up on to his shoulder, she fell backward, her slim figure hurtling headlong down the staircase, to lie in a motionless, crumpled heap at its foot.

The orchestra broke off discordantly, and a moment of shocked, horrified silence filled the great theatre. Then, as a hubbub of tongues arose, the curtain dropped and a black-coated, shirt-fronted manager hurried in front to announce that Mademoiselle Mauvigny was injured—how seriously it was as yet impossible to say. The performance must in any case be discontinued, and he begged the audience to disperse quietly. Their money would be returned to them at the box-office.

Awed by the suddenness of the catastrophe, the big assemblage of people streamed out obediently through the various exits. With one exception. Tony, his face white and set, battled his way against the opposing press of the crowd and contrived at last to pass through the doorway which led behind the scenes.

Yvonne had already been carried from the stage to her dressing-room, where a doctor, hastily summoned from his seat in the theatre, was attending her. Half an hour—an age-long half-hour—elapsed before he emerged from the room. Tony, waiting in the corridor, confronted him with a swift question:

"Miss Sutherland—Mademoiselle Mauvigny, I mean—how badly is she hurt?"

The doctor was English. Hearing the urgent query, he turned abruptly and scanned the speaker's tense face.

"Are you a relative of hers?" he asked briefly.

For a moment Tony made no answer. Then he said quietly:

"I'm the man she's going to marry."

The other's expression grew suddenly compassionate.

"I'm afraid I've very bad news to give you," he said pitifully.

It seemed to Tony as though the walls and floor of the ill-lit corridor rose and surged towards him like the waves of the sea.

"She's not—*killed*?" he whispered, with dry lips.

"No, no! Not that. But—she'll never dance again," answered the doctor gravely.

To his surprise, a muttered "Thank God!" broke from the man beside him. He glanced at him curiously.

"Have you told her yet?" pursued Tony. Then, as the doctor shook his head: "Then, don't! I've a particular reason for asking," he added, in response to the other's look of astonishment. "I—I want to tell her myself."

The doctor appeared relieved. He had no objection whatever to being spared what he had been anticipating as a most unpleasant duty.

"I shall be very glad for some one else to tell her," he acknowledged. "She'll take it hard, I'm afraid. At present, she imagines that the injury she has sustained to her foot is curable. So it is, for all practical purposes. But not for professional dancing. The tendons would always be liable to give way under any great strain. And a second collapse might result in permanent lameness."

A few minutes later Tony was admitted to the dressing-room. Yvonne was lying on the couch looking rather pale and shaken, her right foot skilfully bandaged. A flame of scarlet flew up into her face as she saw who it was that had been admitted, but when Tony knelt beside her and would have taken her in his arms she waved him back determinedly.

"No, no! What are you thinking of? You shouldn't have come here now—now that you are married," she gasped.

"Married?" He stared down at her. "But I'm not married! I never shall be—unless you'll marry me."

She gazed at him in bewilderment. Stammeringly she told him of the information she had gleaned from the newspapers. While she was speaking a look of comprehension dawned on his face, to be succeeded at last by a slow, whimsical smile.

"Only, you see, my father didn't die, after all," he observed. "Instead, he cheated the doctors and recovered.

There was no reason why he shouldn't. He's only fifty-five, and has the constitution of an ox. My mother died when I was a child, and it was he, not I, who married Hermione Dykeland—and they're remarkably happy together. As happy as we should have been if——"

"Ah, Tony, don't!" she broke in swiftly. "I suppose you—you'll never forgive me—now?"

He looked down at her with steady eyes.

"But—what about your dancing?" he asked. "You've become a very famous personage since those days. I couldn't ask you, now, to give it up."

Her hands went out to him.

"You wouldn't need to—ask me, Tony dear," she said quietly. "I'd give it up to-morrow if—if you wanted me."

"Well, I do want you," he told her. And proceeded to demonstrate the fact forthwith in a manner there was no mistaking.

Presently she leaned a little away from him.

"Tony," she said regretfully, "it's taken me a long time to learn that love counts more than anything else, hasn't it? We've wasted three whole years."

"We'll make up for it in the course of the next forty or fifty, belovedest," he assured her encouragingly.

It was not until several days later that he told her of the doctor's verdict.

"I wouldn't let them tell you before," he said. "I felt I must know whether you were willing—while you still believed you would be able to dance again—to pay the penalty—whether you loved me enough for that."

She lifted her face to his, and in her eyes lay a great peace and contentment.

"I've borne a much harder penalty for these last three years," she said simply.

CHAPTER III

THE DEATH ROCKS

1

THE sands of Sainte Corinne, palely golden, seemed almost to shimmer in the blazing sunlight. It poured down upon them from a sky of dazzling turquoise and sprinkled with a myriad dancing points of light the surface of a sea as irrepressibly blue as the sky above it.

Here and there the sail of a late homing fishing-boat splashed a note of brown or orange into the prevailing azure, an effect which brought a gleam of appreciation into the cynical grey eyes of a man who was lying prone on the sand in the pool of shadow thrown by a sheltering rock.

That he was an Englishman was self-evident. His clean-limbed build, supple and sinewy, testified to that, as well as his close-cropped hair, fair and curling a little in spite of its ruthless shearing.

That he was less conventional than most Englishmen of his class was also evident. He wore neither coat nor hat, and his silk shirt flapped carelessly open at the throat, revealing a V-shaped patch of milk-white skin that contrasted oddly with the golden tan of face and neck.

Beside him, leaning against the base of the rock, stood a girl whose whole heart revealed itself in the worshipping gaze with which her dark, brooding eyes were bent upon him.

She was clad, like any other of the fisher-girls of Ste. Corinne, in a bright-coloured blouse and short homespun skirt, but a snowy kerchief worn about her shoulders, its ends

crossed upon her slight young bosom and fastened with a heavy silver clasp, gave a certain little individual air of daintiness and distinction to her costume.

But then, Marie Contenelle was not really one of the girls of Ste. Corinne, she would have told you. She was of Petit Coin, which, as its name implied, was a "little corner" all to itself, a picturesque cluster of cottages across the bay from the village proper of Ste. Corinne. Here only a few of the more successful fisher-folk aspired to live, for rents were higher than at Ste. Corinne and cottages few in number.

Marie's father, old Pierre Contenelle, had been known as one of the finest fishermen along the coast, and had done uncommonly well for himself. Gradually he had acquired the sole ownership of several boats, and when he finally retired from active participation in the fishing, leaving younger men to carry on in his stead, it was to one of the best and biggest cottages at Petit Coin.

Here Marie kept house for him—Madame Contenelle having slept in the little village cemetery these ten years past—and it was rumoured that when she married, old Pierre would bestow upon her a *dot* which would exceed that of any other girl in the district.

Consequently there was keen competition among the younger fishermen to ingratiate themselves with Marie Contenelle, and Jean Garnier and Jacques Legrand and Armand Bigot had each at one time or another fancied himself her chosen favourite, only to find, when he came to put his fortune to the test, that Marie had remained disillusioningly heart-whole.

She laughed them all away in turn, with a careless smile of berry-red lips and a flick of slender brown fingers, and some there were who whispered that for all her lovely face and the big dowry which old Contenelle could give her, Marie would end her days as a *vieille fille*. Than which, as every one knows, there is no more appalling fate for a woman to contemplate!

And then had come the Englishman! Strolling idly across to Petit Coin one day from the little inn at Ste. Corinne where he was stopping, with his hands in his pockets as though he had nothing better to do with them, and in his grey eyes that look of bitter, weary cynicism which had gripped Marie's tender heart and wrung it, for all the world —as she had expressed it to herself—as a dishcloth is wrung in the hands.

Perhaps the simile sprang into her mind from the fact that at the moment those hard, hurt eyes first encountered hers she was engaged in washing the family linen, plunging it elbow-deep in the cool running water whither the women-folk all came to do their *blanchissage,* then spreading it upon the smooth-worn flag-stones at the water's edge and beating it with a flat piece of wood.

The Englishman had stopped, laughed a little, and then, sitting down on a bench close at hand, had produced from his pockets a sketch-book and pencil and with a few deft strokes had made a picture of the little scene.

"Want to see it?" he asked. As Marie shook her head uncomprehendingly he repeated the question in fluent French.

And when she had rather shyly acquiesced and he flipped open the book again for her to see the sketch he had made, an ejaculation of enraptured astonishment escaped her.

"Mais me voilà!" she exclaimed, pleased as a child. "It is I myself whom *monsieur* has depicted. *Et voilà aussi la mère Bigot et sa petite Elsette!* But it is wonderful—*èpatant*—the likeness! And in so few strokes of the pencil. *Monsieur* is a great artist, then, *sans doute?"*

"An artist—yes," the Englishman had answered. "But great? That is always for posterity to settle, isn't it? Would you care to have the sketch, mademoiselle?"

Marie assented eagerly, and he had torn the leaf out of his book and given it to her, first scrawling his name across the corner: *Christopher Quain.*

The name was one to conjure with in artistic circles. Five years ago nothing but a struggling, half-starved painter, pawning the very clothes from off his back to find the wherewithal to buy his precious tubes of pigment, Quain had leapt suddenly into fame, and now no exhibition was complete unless one of "C. Q.'s masterpieces" hung on the line, nor any society woman's claim to be a reigning beauty established until her portrait had been painted by him.

Marie Contenelle, of course, knew nothing of all this. She only knew that, to her, the name of Christopher Quain sounded like all the harps of heaven singing together and set her heart racing within her in sudden, disquieting tumult.

But that came afterwards—after Quain, attracted by the charming view of Ste. Corinne which could be obtained from the Petit Coin side of the bay, had demanded that rooms should be found for him in the vicinity forthwith, in order that he might paint a picture of the little French fishing village from that particular angle.

He had been very insistent in his demands, waving aside every objection raised and supplicating Marie to rescue him from his dilemma.

"You would not, I am sure, little one, wish me to sleep *à la belle étoile?*"

And Marie, horrified at the bare notion of this god-like personage sleeping under a hedge in the open like any tramp, had shyly suggested that perhaps her father might consent to take him as a lodger. He had done the same thing in respect of English tourists once or twice before, provided—this with a vivid scarlet blush—they could pay well.

"He can name his own price," Quain had said.

And old Contenelle, having caught the village gossip concerning the stranger as it flew from mouth to mouth, had named a pretty stiff one.

So it came about that Quain had been lodging for some ten days or more with the Contenelles when, on this bluest of blue summer mornings, he lay on the sands and watched

the brown and yellow sails of the fishing smacks as they came in on the tide.

"Look jolly, don't they?" he commented idly. "Know whose they are, Marie?"

She seemed to drag her eyes unwillingly away from their absorbed contemplation of his lean face.

"The first one is Pierre Fougard's boat," she said. "He is not often late returning. Without doubt he has a fine catch. *Et voilà* Armand Bigot who follows. Ah! He knows well how to sail a boat, that one!"

Quain smiled.

"But he didn't know how to win your heart, eh, Marie?" he suggested whimsically.

The red blood rushed into her face, staining it scarlet from the tip of her rounded chin to the broad, low brow whence the dark hair lay folded back on either side like ravens' wings.

"Non, monsieur," she replied in a stifled voice.

The man's eyes travelled slowly downward from her flushed face to her feet. The latter were bare, tanned to a delicious golden-brown, and now, as she spoke, her supple toes were digging into the sand convulsively.

"Don't do that!" he exclaimed peremptorily. "You'll spoil your pretty nails."

He laid his hand lightly on the restless feet and they stayed suddenly still beneath his touch. But he could feel them pulsing under his hand, as the body of some frightened bird that has been caught may palpitate.

He lifted one of the slender members and, holding it poised on his palm, regarded it critically.

"It's the loveliest foot!" he said softly, as though to himself. "With nails as filbert as the nails of any society woman's fingers."

Marie stood almost rigid beside the rock, her hands pressed stiffly, palm downwards, against its sun-warmed surface. Only her breast rose and fell unevenly as the touch of his

hand on her soft, bare flesh sent little quivering thrills of ecstasy flying like fire through all her veins.

Suddenly she tore her foot from his clasp.

"Ah! *Lâchez-moi*—let me go, *monsieur!*"

And in an instant she had fled from him, rushing away across the golden sands like a startled deer.

With a muttered exclamation Quain sprang to his feet and dashed in pursuit, the keenness of the hunter suddenly leaping to life in him.

The ill-matched race was inevitably of short duration. The man's long strides covered almost twice the ground of each flying step of the small bare feet that flitted desperately ahead, and in a few moments she was lying in his arms, panting, her head thrown back against his chest, her quivering mouth, like a scarlet fruit, just beneath his own.

He stooped his head and kissed her full on the lips. Then, as she lay still in tremulous surrender, he said quickly:

"Could *I* win your heart, Marie? Could I?"

It was a moment before she answered, and when she did there was an odd little catch in her voice—half pain, half ecstasy—that went straight to the heart like the appeal of a child.

"Ah, *monsieur—monsieur!* But you know! My heart—he is all yours!"

His arms tightened round her.

"Then kiss me!" he said imperiously. "Kiss me back, Marie!"

She lifted her face obediently and kissed him with an innocent fervour that yielded him her very soul.

"Je t'adore!" she whispered.

2

"It is wonderful you should love me like this," murmured Marie in soft amazement.

An hour, two hours, had gone by. They had neither of them kept count of time.

"You, a so famous artist and I merely a poor fisherman's daughter. . . . But we are not really poor, *mon bien-aimé*. I shall have a good *dot*"—looking up at him with a shy, proud anxiety for his approval.

"And I will be *une bonne petite femme*—a good little wife when we are married, my Christophe. I will cook and bake and sew, and tend well the house while you paint the great pictures that shall make you even more famous still."

Married! Wife! These two words leaped at Quain's consciousness. The rest of her innocent chatter faded into a meaningless blur of words.

Marie Contenelle had evidently accepted that hot, swift love-making of his as the preliminary to marriage! Humbly, thankfully even, with an infinitely touching modesty and diffidence, but, none the less, just as simply and naturally as a woman of his own class might have done.

It was wonderful, of course, amazing—a miracle of *le bon dieu*—that a *monsieur* so high-placed should have deigned to love the daughter of old Pierre Contenelle. But since it had actually happened, she accepted the fact with a childlike faith, and the arms of her love reached up passionately to his that had stooped so far to find it.

It had never entered her direct and candid mind to imagine that he could mean anything other than marriage.

Quain, startled and somewhat conscience-stricken, began to ask himself what in the name of thunder he *had* meant?

Why—why—he had meant nothing at all, really, in the first instance. It was only that it was summer time and the blood ran quick in his veins, while Petit Coin seemed a little corner of the world predestined for love and romance. And the warmth of the golden sunlight, the spurring tang of the brine blown in from the bluest of seas, Marie's sheer loveliness and the young, helpless passion that trembled

through her limbs at the touch of his hand on her soft, bare feet, had all combined to rush him into impetuous speech before he quite knew what he was doing.

And now, how on earth was he to tell her—how make her understand that he had actually meant nothing, demanded no more than those kisses which she had yielded him, mouth to mouth, her heart upon her lips? How put into words the crude fact that he had no intention—never had had any—of marrying her?

And yet—*why not?* The sudden question jarred his thoughts to an abrupt standstill, like a brake applied to a revolving wheel.

Why not? He was free. Oh, aye! He had earned the freedom to do as he willed with his life five years ago—and paid the price for it. Why, after all, should he not wed Marie Contenelle? Of course, he could not take her back to England with him and make her châtelaine of that stately house of his to which it had become a much-prized privilege to be invited. But he could give her a little home of her own, here by the sea at Petit Coin, to which he would come as occasion offered. And he could make her utterly and entirely happy.

He knew he could do this, even though all that he had once called love lay dead within him. For when a woman loves with the primitive, adoring passion of Marie Contenelle, to be possessed of the loved one holds a supreme happiness that nothing on earth can ever take away.

And in return she would pour out for him all the treasure of her love, after a time, perhaps even thawing that frozen heart of his a little. At Petit Coin there would be a quiet haven shut away from the world where he would be always welcomed, and where, at least, he would never find anything but love and simplicity and truth.

And perhaps, some day, there would be the sound of little footsteps about the cottage, baby voices lisping a quaint mixture of French and English. For a moment the bitter look

died out of Quain's tired eyes. Grim and self-contained as the man showed himself to the world at large, irretrievably embittered by something that lay always in the unforgotten past, he loved children as tenderly as a woman may—and comprehended them and won their hearts with an ease and swiftness which few women achieve.

He and the kiddies always understood and trusted each other at sight. Perhaps it was the child they apprehended in him—the eternal child that is always hidden somewhere in the make-up of genius—and which responded to and understood the child in them.

"Christophe? Of what art thou thinking?"

Marie's soft voice broke the long silence wonderingly. There was so much to say; it seemed to her foolish to waste the golden moments.

The man's rather weary eyes rested on her consideringly.

"I was thinking whether I ought to marry you or not, Marie," he answered. "I'm not sure."

She slid her hand into his confidingly.

"Me, I am sure—oh, quite sure!"

"I don't know," he said gravely. "I don't know."

"But—but why?" Her voice faltered suddenly, like a child's on the verge of tears. The gravity of his tone had frightened her.

"Why? Why, because you are so young and sweet and adorable, while I'm old and battered and world-weary——"

"*Non!*" she interrupted indignantly. "You are *not* old nor battered!"

He shook his head, smiling rather sadly.

"I am—inside," he replied. "But you, little one—you are like an opening flower. And you love me very much?"

"*Oui, c'est vrai.* I love you very much."

"While I," he continued steadily, "have no love to give you. At least, not the same kind of love. It wouldn't be a fair bargain between us."

"I do not make a bargain with the man I love," protested

Marie stoutly. "I—just love him." Then, with sudden terror, a rush of self-depreciation flooding her whole being: "Is it that you do not want me? I know I am not good enough to be your wife, but oh! I love you, my Christophe! Ah! Do not say you do not want me any more!"

Her great eyes implored him, and he drew her into the curve of his arm, kissing her quivering, down-drooped lips into a tremulous smile.

"No, no, it is not that," he said soothingly. "Of course I want you, Marie. Who wouldn't? But I'm going to tell you a story and then—afterwards—it shall be for you to decide whether you will marry me or not."

She nestled against him.

"*Eh bien!* I have decided now."

Quain shook her gently.

"But you must listen first," he said, smiling a little. "Years ago, five years to be precise, I wasn't what you are pleased to call a 'famous artist.' I was just a poor devil of a painter, struggling to make my way in the world—and not succeeding. And I was engaged to be married, which made it of the utmost importance that I *should* succeed. Because the woman I loved was the daughter of people who expected her to make a very fine marriage indeed. They were not rich themselves, but they contrived to live as though they were, so as to give their daughter her 'chance.' "

"Was she very beautiful?" asked Marie swiftly.

The man's eyes dreamed a moment, as though they beheld some inner vision.

"Very beautiful," he answered simply. "All white and gold like a tall madonna lily."

"And—and you loved her very much?"

"So much that when she threw me over—jilted the poor unknown painter in favour of the wealthy Lord Delmorne—my heart dried up. And that is why I say it would not be fair of me to marry you."

"Do you mean"—Marie's eyes widened with incredulous horror—"do you mean she did not marry you because you were—*poor?* That she married this other *monsieur*—Milor' Delmorne—just because he was much richer?"

"Very much richer," replied Quain shortly. "Yes, you've put the case in a nutshell, Marie. It's often done, you know—in society."

"She can never have loved you!" stated Marie with simplicity.

"Well—not as much as I was fool enough to imagine, evidently. I begged her to wait for me—I knew I should succeed some day. But, you see, she, too, was poor. So she couldn't wait. That's all."

"And you love her still—still?" Marie hardly breathed the words.

"No. I shall never love her—or any one—again. That's why I say I ought not to marry you. Do you want to marry a man with a dead heart, Marie?"

She nodded.

"Yes, please. For my love, it is so great it will make him to live again."

Quain rose and, stooping, lifted her to her feet beside him. They stood together with the golden sunlight all about them.

"Very well," he said, half mockingly, half tenderly. "Have it your own way. We'll be married as soon as ever I have finished my picture of Ste. Corinne. But I'm afraid you're getting a mighty poor bargain, my Marie, when all's said and done."

3

For a week things went on very much as usual. Daily Marie would row Quain out across the bay to the Caverne du Diable, a great cave at the foot of the cliff which he had chosen for his "studio," since it tunnelled its way into the

rock at the most seaward point of the western arm of the bay, affording a glimpse of Ste. Corinne, with the wide sea beyond, that delighted his artist's soul.

Here, in the mouth of the cave, sheltered alike from sun and wind, he worked at his picture. Sometimes Marie would remain, lingering to watch him at his work with adoring eyes, but more often she would return home across the bay and busy herself with her household duties, rowing back again in the afternoon to fetch him.

For it was Marie who alone knew the only safe channel by which the Devil's Cavern might be approached. Indeed, it was she who had first brought the spot to Quain's notice as a possible coign of vantage from which to paint his picture, since no other among the fisher-folk of Ste. Corinne cared to venture there.

There were strange stories told about the Caverne du Diable. For one thing, it was said to be haunted, and that whoever approached it did so at the peril of his immortal soul. For another—and, since most people are more concerned over the safety of their mortal bodies than over that of their immortal souls, this constituted probably the real ground upon which the place was shunned—the entrance to the cavern was guarded by a series of wicked-looking ridges of rock—the Death Rocks, they were called—toothed like the jaw of a rat and calculated to rip the bottom out of a boat as easily as one cuts butter with a sharp knife.

And at high tides, when those murderous teeth were hidden just beneath the surface of the water, to approach the cavern was a matter of no inconsiderable danger and only to be attempted by one who knew to an inch the lie of the channel through which a boat might pass in safety.

At Ste. Corinne the fisher-folk declared that Marie Contenelle knew it as she knew the palm of her hand, so they left it to her to act as ferryman across the bay to the mad Englishman who had chosen such an unblest spot from which to paint his picture.

Marie used to love the walk home in the evening from the little stone jetty where she moored her boat, up to her father's cottage on the hill, with Quain strolling beside her with that long, lazy stride of his which she found "so English" and so altogether adorable.

The man, too, grew to count upon it—to look forward to it as a fitting close to the day's work. It seemed to him in some way to symbolise the simple, tranquil life that would be theirs at Petit Coin when he and Marie were man and wife—the woman, the home-maker, coming to meet her mate in the cool of the evening after the labour of the day was past.

And then, suddenly, without any warning, the fates that watch and make and mar snatched up the skein of their two lives and twisted it into inextricable confusion.

It happened one evening, just as they had returned from the Caverne du Diable. Marie was kneeling on the lowest step of the jetty, making fast the boat's painter to an iron ring, when she heard a sudden violent exclamation break from Quain, a cry of anger or bewilderment—she hardly knew what it held.

Her eyes flew to him where he stood at the top of the flight of stone steps. His figure was taut and rigid, and his face, in the clear evening light, had grown all at once grey and haggard. Marie's glance flashed onward, seeking what he saw that had so changed and altered him.

A woman was standing at the edge of the jetty, straight and slender and pliant as a hazel rod, silhouetted against the flaming background of the sunset sky.

Marie looked at her, and knew in the same instant that it was the Englishwoman—the woman Quain had loved.

She was very beautiful. Gold hair swathed round a fine, small head, ivory skin hardly less white than the pearly gleam of the white gown she was wearing—"all white and gold like a tall madonna lily." And out of that whiteness

stared eyes blue like hyacinths—tragic, imploring eyes—and a broken murmur came from lips that shook.

"Christopher. . . . Oh, Chris!"

The appeal of it might have melted a heart of stone. But apparently it fell on deaf ears, for Quain, turning to help Marie up the last uneven steps, merely bowed and made as though to pass on.

"Chris, won't you even speak to me?" came the soft, dragging voice once more.

The man hesitated an instant.

"I think we have nothing to say to each other—you and I," he answered quietly.

Then, suddenly, with a curious grim deliberation:

"This is my fiancée—Mademoiselle Contenelle."

The woman drew back with a cry so quickly stifled that it sounded hardly more than a caught breath. Then, turning to Marie, she held out her hand.

"I hope you will be very happy," she said gently.

What that supreme effort must have cost her, Marie did not know. She did not even think of it. She was only aware of a grace and graciousness that was part of some world of which she—simple Marie Contenelle—had no cognisance. She knew it must be Christopher's world. And she was acutely conscious, as she stood beside this soft-voiced, white and golden woman, of her own homespun skirt and bare brown feet, and of the black hair and sun-tanned skin that had seemed attractive enough when last the little mirror hung on the cottage wall had shown them to her. Now she felt that they were coarse and common—that she herself was, after all, only a peasant fishergirl, miles removed from this madonna lily of a woman.

All next day and the day after that Marie's thoughts centred round the Englishwoman, hating her with a bitter hatred. It was true that Christopher had refused to speak with her, that he had openly—almost triumphantly—acknowledged old Contenelle's daughter as his future wife,

but in her heart of hearts Marie knew that this other was the woman he loved—and would always love. She had seen his eyes as they had met the gaze of those beseeching blue ones—*and she knew.*

And the next day Quain did not go to the Caverne du Diable. A letter had come for him by the morning post. Marie herself had taken it from the hands of the *facteur* as he went his rounds—a letter in a white, square envelope, faintly fragrant of violets, and after Christopher had read it he had told her that she should have a holiday from rowing him across the bay that day—that he felt disinclined for work and that one must never paint unless one felt in the mood.

There were several occasions after that when, apparently, Quain was not "in the mood" for work, and then came the day when Marie, returning from a marketing expedition to Ste. Corinne and taking a short cut through the woods that lay between the village and Petit Coin, caught a glimpse of a white gown and close beside it the blurred grey of Christopher's tweed coat—the coat she brushed for him so conscientiously each evening that it might be ready for his use on the morrow.

She stepped behind the trunk of a tree, and, as she stood hidden there, she heard Quain's voice, shaken with pain and longing.

"I could never believe in you—never trust you again, Virginia. . . . You failed me once—utterly!"

"I know." The soft, broken voice she had heard on the jetty came in answer. "I know. But I have been punished, Chris! My life with Delmorne was unspeakable. And now—now that he is dead, can't we ever be happy together—you and I? Give me another chance, Chris——"

Somehow—she never quite knew how she accomplished it—Marie contrived to slip away unseen. She could not bear to listen to that soft, sweet voice pleading—pleading so that surely no man could resist its supplication for very long!

And, as she made her way back to the cottage, something wild and untamed sprang to life within her—the savage, primitive instinct of a woman to guard and keep her own, to fight for the individual possession of the man she has chosen as her mate.

When, later, Quain returned, he found her sitting brooding over the fire. She rose slowly, and faced him with eyes in which smouldered a dull fire of mingled pain and anger.

"You love her—that Englishwoman!"

She flung the accusation at him.

"Yes," he acknowledged simply. "I love her. I did not know I could still love her. I'm sorry, Marie."

A sudden fear clutched at her heart.

"You're not going back to her—say you're not going back to her?"

"No," he said quietly. "I'm not going back to her. You need not be afraid, Marie. You see, though I love her, I don't trust her enough—to go back."

Marie flew to him and laid her arms about his neck.

"I will make it all up to you, *adoré*. Some day when I shall have given you a son, you will forget—forget that you ever loved the Englishwoman."

But in her heart she knew that he would never forget, and that a time might come when love would at last teach him how to trust again. And when that time should come, her own happiness would be swept away for ever.

4

Marie stooped over the iron pot which swung above the fire and stirred its contents. It was nearly supper time—one keeps early hours at Petit Coin—and the savoury stew simmering in the black pot was all ready to serve as soon as Quain should return from the Caverne du Diable.

He had gone there alone to-day. By this time he knew the channel between the rocks almost as well as Marie her-

self, and she had felt no qualms for his safety when she had informed him this morning that he must row across to the cavern by himself, beaching the boat on the narrow strip of stone upon which the cave debouched. As for her, she purposed accomplishing a "big wash" and could not go with him.

"Thy silk shirts alone are the affair of one woman, extravagant one!" she had added, taking obvious pride and delight in his lordly unconcern for such trivial details.

But now it was getting late—later than his wonted hour for returning. She knew he had hoped to complete his picture to-day. Possibly he had delayed a little in order to add the final touches.

She crossed the room to the window and looked out. She could see her father digging in the garden, but there was no sign of the familiar beloved figure swinging up the hillside road, and once more she returned to stir the mixture bubbling in the pot above the fire.

A few minutes later came a knocking at the door—uncertain, apprehensive, yet conveying a sort of desperate determination in its persistence. Marie lifted the latch with a feeling of curiosity. Who could it be at this hour of the evening?

As she opened the door a woman's figure half stumbled, half fell into the room, and Marie instinctively put out her hand to steady her. Then, with a sharp cry, she snatched it back again, for the woman who confronted her, swaying on her feet, was Virginia Delmorne—the woman Christopher loved.

She was drawing her breath in great gasps like one who has run to the limit of exhaustion, and her face was grey-white save for two patches of dull crimson, born of stress, high up on the cheek-bones. Her forehead was rimmed with little beads of sweat and the dishevelled gold hair clung to her brow in dark wet rings. The hyacinth-blue eyes were wide and staring, dilated with some mortal fear.

But her obvious condition of distress struck no spark of sympathy from Marie's heart—she, usually so pitiful and eager to give help and succour.

"Why have you come here?" she demanded stiffly. "You are not welcome, madame!"

A sudden look of impatience flashed across Virginia's strained face.

"Oh, never mind all that now," she cried harshly. "Listen! Christopher is in danger. He is at the cavern . . . without a boat. . . ."

Her gasping breath failed her, and Marie struck in scornfully.

"You speak without knowledge, madame. He has taken the boat. I did not row him across this morning."

"I know—I know. But he must have let her get adrift . . . while he was painting." She pressed her hand to her side, then continued with an effort. "The boat is in the bay . . . it has drifted in. You can see it from the shore."

"Drifted in?" repeated Marie stupidly.

"Yes. Don't you understand? Oh, my God! You *must* understand! It is high tide soon—a spring tide, they tell me, when the cavern fills right up to the roof. And Christopher is there!"

A sudden cry of anguish tore its way from Marie's lips.

"*La grande marée!* Mother of God! I had forgotten!"

"Yes, yes!"—desperately. "*La grande marée*—the spring tide. And no one will go—no one will face the Death Rocks. So I came here. *You* must go! You must save him!"

As though at the end of her tether, Virginia sank back against the wall, clutching at the framework of the door.

"There's not a man amongst all those cowards will go," she cried chokingly. "They are afraid—afraid of the devil, they say. And I can't manage a boat—helpless fool that I am! . . . You'll go?"—imploringly.

"Go? Of course I go!" flung back Marie. And ran out of the cottage, leaving the other still leaning, spent and exhausted, against the wall.

But the next moment Marie returned, walking swiftly. Her face was a pallid white beneath its tan, and in her eyes was a new, strange look—a look of determination. And something more—something inexplicably triumphant.

Virginia's drooping figure straightened.

"You have not gone!" she cried, her voice shrill with dismay.

"No," she said. "Why, after all, should I go? Why should I seek to save him—*for you?*"

"For me—what do you mean? Oh, don't waste time talking crazily like that! Go—go!"

"I am not crazy. I know—you know it, too—that some day he will come back to you"—with conviction. "He—loves you."

"Loves me? What does it matter whom he loves? For God's sake, *go!*" Virginia smote her hands together despairingly.

"It matters to me," returned Marie stubbornly.

To Virginia, she appeared to be utterly unmoved, stolidly oblivious of the momentarily increasing danger which threatened the man whom she professed to love down there by the Death Rocks.

Actually, it was only by an almost superhuman effort of self-control that Marie stilled her body, forcibly leashing its straining muscles whilst she quivered to be gone.

Her hands were clenched; the only sign of the turmoil of her spirit revealed itself in the restless movement of her bare toes which twisted and twitched against the wooden floor incessantly.

"He loves you—and some day he will come back to you," she repeated monotonously.

Virginia could have struck her. Her agony of impatience manifested itself in a sudden fierce desire to hurt.

"Yes, he will come back to me," she retorted savagely. "Unless you'd rather let him die!"

Then, unable to endure the torture of delay another moment, she almost screamed: "Oh, go! For the love of heaven, go!"

But Marie made no motion to obey. Instead, she drew a step nearer to the shaking, agonised figure of the other woman.

"If I go," she said slowly, "will you give him up?"

"Give him up?"

"Yes. Show him"—deliberately—"that you have not changed—that you are no more to be trusted now than you were five years ago. Tell him you have but been fooling him again—that you are already *fiancée,* promised to another. . . . Otherwise—I do not go."

Virginia drew back from her slowly, staring at her with wide, horrified eyes.

"Do you mean it?" she said in dry, whispering tones. Then, with bitter contempt: "Is that your price for his life?"

Marie nodded.

"Yes. If you love him"—implacably—"you will pay it."

For a moment Virginia hid her face, and Marie could see only the gold hair and the white hands covering the still whiter face. The madonna lily was broken now—beaten down to the earth by the storm that had swept over it.

When at length Virginia uncovered her face Marie almost flinched from it. It reminded her of the face of the tortured saint in a picture she had seen one day at the convent.

"Go!" Virginia's lips moved stiffly. "Go and save him—for yourself. I will—do—as you say."

Like an arrow suddenly released Marie fled out of the cottage and down the hill to the shore. Precious moments had been wasted in that fight with the Englishwoman for possession of the man they both loved. But there was still time—time to save him. And she had won—Christopher was hers

now. He would never think any more of this woman who would force him to believe that she had deceived him twice—*twice!*

Arrived at the shore she found a little knot of people gathered there—two or three fisher-lads and a handful of women gazing uneasily towards the Devil's Cavern, where already the incoming sea had barred the entrance with a foam-flecked rim of water.

Prisoned behind that churning barrier of clamorous sea the man she loved awaited death. Marie's heart beat high, for it was she—she who would bring him life!

She alone of the two hundred souls in Ste. Corinne had nerve and skill enough to manœuvre a boat safely in and out again from that cavern, even though *la grande marée* had already flooded its floor.

She bestowed one fierce, sweeping glance of contempt upon the little crowd collected on the shore.

"Cowards! *Poltrons!*" she flung at them.

Then, with firm hands, she gripped the gunwale of one of the small boats beached high up on the shore and prepared to run it down to the water's edge. Half a dozen willing hands stretched out to help her. Gladly enough would any or all of the lads who crowded round have gone to the rescue of the Englishman had it involved but the facing of a rough sea. The sea was a familiar enemy. But the evil spirit that lurked in the Devil's Cavern—him they dared not face. To attempt to rescue a man from the grip of the Diable de la Caverne was to court certain death—and perhaps other things worse than death!

And as Marie bent to her oars, and sent the boat shearing through the water, they watched her as men may watch one of their fellows go to what they believe to be his doom.

. . . . . .

The sun was setting when Marie shipped her oars at the side of the jetty. The tide was almost at its full now, heav-

ing quietly, and the boat rocked easily on the surface of the water. In the stern lay the motionless figure of a man.

"He is but stunned," explained Marie coolly to those who came hurrying forward to help. "That is all. He did not stoop low enough as we came out from the cavern and he struck his head."

Then she looked up and saw Virginia standing on the jetty. By some chance hap the men had laid Quain's unconscious figure almost at her feet, and Marie saw her kneel swiftly and lift his head, pillowing it against her bosom. The gold hair, loosened from the pins which held it, fell suddenly forward like a glimmering curtain, hiding his face from Marie's eyes.

It seemed to her symbolical. Strange thoughts had taken birth within her as she rowed her helpless burden back across the bay. Somewhere behind the seething triumph which obsessed her a secret shame had stirred—shame at the bargain she had driven—slowly but very surely making of that triumph a thing of naught, valueless and futile. And with it came an odd, unwilling admiration for the other woman who had bought the life she loved at such a bitter price.

Marie's primitive soul grappled with the new significances it was dimly apprehending. Love did not mean only possession, then. Sometimes, it seemed, it fulfilled itself in renunciation.

Her eyes fastened curiously upon the two central figures of the little group upon the quay. Behind that shining veil of hair the man she had called her lover rested against the breast of the woman whom he loved. . . .

Slowly Marie bent forward till her face was on a level with Virginia's.

"He loved you—only you, *madame,*" she said in a queer, shaken voice. "See, I give him you."

She turned away quickly, and, stepping back into the boat, set her with her bows once more towards the Caverne du Diable.

It was a few moments before the little throng gathered about Quain and Virginia realised that she had gone. Then, with one accord, they surged frantically forward to the edge of the jetty, waving and gesticulating to that solitary figure in the boat, calling on her to turn back.

But she paid no heed, driving her craft through the water with swift, steady strokes as though responding to some other voice, a voice which she alone could hear, that bade her hasten—hasten. . . .

And presently the straining eyes of the watchers on the quay saw the boat cross the pathway of flame which the setting sun had cast upon the sea and head straight for the Rocks of Death. . . .

. . . . . .

The fisher-folk of Ste. Corinne still tell you many queer tales of the ill-omened Caverne du Diable. But all agree in this, that whosoever is foolhardy enough to venture there, even though he may have the luck to come back in safety, will sooner or later, without rhyme or reason, feel himself impelled to return thither, and that then, no matter how well he may know the channel, he will be dashed to pieces on the Death Rocks.

For Marie Contenelle knew the lie of the channel as the palm of her hand—she, who went to and fro to the cavern in safety a score or more of times. Yet, in the end, was she not seen to row, bows foremost, straight on to the rocks and meet the death they promised?

CHAPTER IV

THE LITTLE FOOL'S WISDOM

"SHE'S a little fool!" commented Sadie Brunner tersely.

As she spoke, her honest grey eyes rested irritably on the retreating figures of a man and girl who had just quitted the club together and were making their way leisurely towards the tennis courts. The girl swung her racket self-consciously as she walked, as though defiantly aware of the fusillade of disapproving glances which pursued her from the veranda.

"An arrant little fool," reiterated Sadie, twisting her tall tumbler meditatively round and round between her hands so that the lump of ice which floated on the surface of its contents clinked refreshingly against the sides of the glass.

"Or a knave," countered the thin, acrid voice of the senior major's wife.

Sadie, being young and kind-hearted, and only the wife of a subaltern, was disposed to take a less prejudiced view.

"Oh, she's too unsophisticated for that, don't you think? I should say"—her eyes twinkling—"Gayer Forrest is the knave. Bad man!"—indulgently.

"Gayer's not bad—only sad!" put in another woman in a voice of lazy amusement. "The sun's dropped out of his sky—temporarily—so he's pursuing the nearest star."

"Somebody should warn her," suggested the doctor's wife.

"And be accused of green-eyed jealousy for their pains!" returned the last speaker with a wry smile. "The suburban temperament doesn't take kindly to advice."

"Is that where she hails from—the suburbs?" asked some one else.

"Isn't it self-evident?" sneered the senior major's wife.

"Address: Mentone Villa, Acacia Avenue, Tooting, I should imagine."

It was too hot for any very vehement discussion, but the idle talk was tinged with an inimical note that there was no mistaking. A three months' bride who has left her husband sweltering in the plains and proceeds to amuse herself without apparently bestowing a single further thought upon him, incidentally attaching to her chariot-wheels the best-looking man in the regiment—and another woman's property at that!—is likely to provoke a certain amount of hostility in even the least rancorous of Indian hill-stations. And in this respect Maisie Derafield had indubitably succeeded. The feminine portion of Dhurrapore had turned against her to a woman.

Not that they were particularly cliquish. On the contrary, Dhurrapore bore the reputation of being rather hospitably inclined towards the stranger within its gates. And when Maisie arrived, looking somewhat frightened and forlorn, and with appealing shadows underneath pathetic hazel eyes, while the news travelled swiftly round that circumstances had compelled her to leave her husband in the plains a bare three months after their wedding-day, she had received the friendliest kind of welcome. The whole station seemed to have combined to cheer and entertain her, and prove to her that although India is a land of sharp, unforeseen partings and sudden hardship, it is, too, a land of enchantment and romance and gaiety—the more vivid and concentrated, perhaps, because no one of the players knows in how long or short a time the game may be abruptly cut short and the grim earnest of life and death adventure thrust in its place.

"What on earth induced you to saddle yourself with her, Brenda, dear?" inquired Mrs. Somers, the woman who had credited Maisie with a "suburban temperament."

Brenda Hartog smiled. She was a quiet, kindly-eyed woman who looked out on the world with the humorous tolerance born of many years' experience of life in India.

"I've kept a more or less maternal eye on Percy Derafield ever since he came out from home," she replied. "His mother and I were at school together——"

"Good gracious! Percy's mother!" came in chorus.

"What was she like?" demanded Mrs. Somers curiously.

Again Brenda smiled.

"Very much like you or me," she answered dryly. "But she married wrong, and Percy's the result. He's just like his father—commonplace and hopelessly dull, but a good little fellow for all that—and besottedly in love with Maisie. He simply couldn't have afforded to send her to the hills. So I asked her to stay with me."

"How decent of you!" exclaimed Sadie impulsively.

Mrs. Hartog's glance strayed in the direction of the tennis courts.

"I hope I'm not going to regret it," she said rather dubiously.

She felt even less optimistic a few evenings later, when, at one of the many dances wherewith Dhurrapore cultivated a light heart and a lean figure, she observed Gayer Forrest dancing with Maisie for what she felt convinced was the seventh time in succession.

"I know I've counted six!" Unconsciously she spoke aloud, and the eyes of the man standing beside her twinkled down at her with some amusement.

"Forrest and your protégée, you mean?" he said, laughing. "If your arithmetic will stand the strain, I dare say you'll be able to treble that before the evening's over."

Mrs. Hartog made no answer. Only her lips closed a little more tightly as she watched Forrest and his partner glide smoothly past—Maisie, her small, eager face uptilted, while Gayer, with bent fair head, made open and outrageous love to her with those gay, reckless blue eyes of his—eyes that feared neither man nor devil and never bothered about the angels.

Maisie's young, unfledged soul thrilled as she met their

glance. Not even at the crucial moment when he had asked her to marry him had Percy's eyes held a hundredth part of the tense significance which Gayer Forrest's managed to convey. She felt herself menaced with the fiery ardours of a *grande passion,* one which had flamed into being—just as it did in novels—too late, and she realised with a species of fearful delight that she was treading on thin ice and rather enjoying the process.

Presently Gayer drew her out on to the veranda—no longer a thing constructed of material roof and flooring, but a moon-washed fairy palace of queer lights and shadows through which they passed into the mysterious, scented silence of the gardens beyond.

"Well?" he asked. "Have you made up your mind yet?"

"Made up my mind? What about?"

"About India. Don't you remember? A month or two ago you told me you weren't at all sure if you'd like it."

Maisie shook her head.

"I'd been having a horrid time, then. It was all strange to me, you see—the money and the servants and everything. And I'm terrified of snakes—and I found one in the bath-room one day!" She laughed. "Looking back, it seems silly and childish, of course."

"So you like India—*now?*"

There was a challenge in the question. With a faint accession of colour, she answered:

"Yes, I like it now."

"So do I," he responded confidently.

She lifted a pair of big, questioning eyes.

"You? But then you must always have liked it. You—you've been here *years!*"

"Yes—years." A touch of bitterness harshened his voice. Perhaps his thoughts had travelled swiftly back over those long years, realising their barrenness. "But I've felt infernally lonely lately—till you came."

Maisie's heart grew big. She flashed a swift upward

glance at his face—good-looking beyond the average, a trifle lined, with its half-cynical, half-amused mouth and reckless, dissatisfied eyes.

"I should never have thought of you as a lonely person," she said. "You've so many friends."

"Friends?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Friends are a poor substitute when you've missed the one thing that really matters."

She was silent. Did he mean—was he trying to tell her that he cared, that they had come into each other's lives—too late?

"Maisie!" The man's voice roughened suddenly. She looked extraordinarily pretty as she stood there in the drifting moonlight—warm red hair and milky skin, the slenderness of her immature figure giving her a curious fictitious grace. The slight commonness—a commonness not so much of feature as of a shallow little mind—which characterised her face was hardly perceptible, momentarily transmuted by the magic alchemy of moonlight. Her hands hung loosely at her sides.

"Maisie!" Gayer caught them swiftly in his—soft, dimpled, characterless small hands, with no significance other than that of essential femininity.

"Oh!" Just the sound of a half-caught breath, almost voiceless. She swayed towards him, her slight young breast rising and falling in sudden tumult.

Forrest hesitated. She was very young and new to life as it is lived under the hot suns of exile, where the game of love is often played lightly enough—sometimes just because there is nothing else to do, sometimes because the loneliness of separation is almost unbearable, and nine times out of ten without much harm to any one concerned. But Maisie had only been married a few months. Perhaps she had not yet learned the art of playing with fire without any subsequent burning of fingers. Slowly Gayer relinquished his clasp of her hands.

"I'd forgotten Derafield," he said abruptly. "Forgive me, Maisie."

"There's nothing to forgive," she replied in her clear, composed little voice. "I think I'd forgotten—Derafield—too."

He was conscious of a slight shock. A woman twice her age couldn't have given him his cue with more complete *sang-froid*. The inference was obvious. Derafield might be her husband, but she was evidently not in the least in love with him. Gayer had made love to many women in his time, and to one woman in particular, but he was no home-breaker. The sense of responsibility which had checked him vanished with Maisie's surprisingly collected announcement.

"Then," he said, in a voice that held a mixture of caress and appeal, "then we are—two—lonely people."

"Yes." Her big eyes, mistily mournful in the moonlight, gazed up at him with a child-like simplicity of response.

He swept her up into his arms, crushing his lips down on to hers in passionate, stormy kisses that filled her with a tremulous mingling of fear and ecstasy. She struggled in his grasp instinctively, like a caught bird. Then, as the hard clasp of his arms only tightened round her, she yielded, conscious of a curious throbbing delight in her surrender to the man's sheer physical strength.

When he released her, she stood trembling a little. This, then, was love—the kind of love she had read about but never experienced. As unlike Percy's staid, complacent love-making as fire is unlike water. With the recollection of Percy the whole tide of the conventions in which she had been reared rushed over her.

"I think—I think we'd better go back to the ball-room," she said primly.

Forrest gave a short laugh.

"Yes, I rather think we had," he agreed sardonically.

Together they turned and walked back, side by side, Gayer still shaken by the storm of passion which her soft,

yielding femininity had aroused in him, Maisie wondering in her undiscriminating small mind when he was going to apologise for the liberty he had taken. She was quite prepared to forgive him, with a wistful graciousness, and tell him that he "mustn't do it again." To her intense astonishment, however, the idea of offering an apology never seemed to occur to him. Instead, he overruled her halting objections and danced with her almost continuously throughout the evening—and "did it again" in the dimness of the small hours of the morning as he helped her out of the rickshaw which had carried her home to Mrs. Hartog's bungalow.

She undressed slowly, wrapt in her thoughts. This was the India of her dreams—a kind of glorified playground where unlimited dances and moonlight picnics were an intrinsic part of the programme, while the shackles of matrimony lay lightly on the wrists that wore them, and where every woman with any pretensions to good looks was infallibly destined to be spoilt and fussed over by men who had little else to do but dance attendance on her.

Some such picture of the sort of existence she would henceforth lead had formulated itself in her mind when Percy Derafield, a small cog in the Indian Civil Service, home on belated leave, had slipped an inexpensive engagement ring on to her finger. He assured her that she would thoroughly enjoy the life in India. "All women do," he had added. "Especially"—with an adoring glance—"the pretty ones." A year later he had sent for her to join him there, and at first she had received a rude awakening from her visions. She discovered that there were just as many pinpricky daily worries, though of a different kind, to contend with as there had been in the little suburban villa at home—with this difference, that there was no kindly, commonplace mother at hand on to whose accustomed shoulders they could be conveniently shifted. There was the same familiar shortage of money. Percy's salary of eight hundred rupees a month sounded lordly enough until you came to calculate the rela-

tive purchasing power of a rupee and an English pound. Then it dwindled appallingly. And in addition to these general disadvantages, there were others peculiar to the country, such as poisonous snakes, and mosquitoes, and an intense, nerve-destroying heat which sapped all Maisie's young vitality.

It was not until Mrs. Hartog's invitation had brought her to Dhurrapore that her visions of Indian life showed any signs of materialising, and then, plunged suddenly into all the gaieties of a lively hill station, the excitement of it went to her head like wine. It had only needed Gayer Forrest's openly evinced devotion to complete matters.

Maisie lay in bed, staring into the warm darkness. She could still feel the strong clasp of Gayer's arms about her slender, yielding body, the passionate pressure of his lips on hers, and a queer little thrill of triumph bubbled up inside her at the reflection that it was she—the one-time Maisie Saunders of Mentone Villa or its equivalent—who had captured the allegiance of the man whom half the women in the station had fought and squabbled over at one time or another. It was rather a feather in her cap. Besides—he was genuinely in love! She had felt it in every nerve of her. If only she were not married! For the first time the idea presented itself to Maisie that she had really rather thrown herself away in marrying Percy. "We shall live in India—my fiancé is in the Indian Civil Service, you know." It had invariably produced the right effect amid the narrow little circle in which she moved, and her mother's contempories had referred to the forthcoming marriage as "quite an excellent match."

At the time, Maisie certainly thought she was doing extremely well for herself. Now she was not quite so sure. She had also believed herself very much in love with Percy. She was not quite so sure of that, either. If only she could have stayed at Dhurrapore before her marriage! Met other men—men like Gayer Forrest—and been able to form com-

parisons. It was not fair on a girl to tie her up before she has had any experience. She went to sleep, conscious of a distinct sense of injury.

The days that followed slipped by in a kind of dream—a dream of which Gayer Forrest was the dominating figure. There were early morning rides, alone with him, snatched interviews, breathless with a stimulating sense of secrecy and forbidden fruit, dances at which he partnered her almost exclusively, and, finally, a tennis tournament wherein he and she carried off the first prize for the mixed doubles right in the face of the whole of Dhurrapore.

Brenda Hartog skilfully fended off criticism for as long as possible, but when at last the colonel's wife said to her: "My dear, we don't want a regimental scandal. Can't you do anything?" she proceeded to take Maisie firmly to task. The latter treated her remonstrances with an airy independence that Brenda found almost as pathetic in its youthful ignorance as it was maddening.

"I don't see that my friendship with Captain Forrest has anything to do with you," asserted Maisie, drawing her slim little figure to its full height and trying to cloak a certain inward quaking of which she was conscious with an immense assumption of offended dignity.

"It has everything to do with me. For one thing, you're my guest here, and to a certain extent I'm responsible for you. For another, I've got the credit of the regiment at heart. That, of course, means nothing to you."

Maisie flushed hotly. As a guest she knew she was behaving badly. She could not defend herself from that point of view, so she took refuge in attack.

"Oh, by all means sneer at me because my husband isn't in the army," she flared. "I'm quite aware we're only Civil Service."

"Oh, my dear——" Brenda coloured painfully. "You know I never thought of that. I'm not a snob. But the

regiment does mean—a good deal—to some of us," she went on simply. "And we don't want one of the dearest and nicest men in it to make a mistake."

"If you call it making a mistake for him to be friendly with me—," began Maisie stormily.

"Friendly?" Mrs. Hartog interrupted her with quiet scorn. "Aren't you rather more than—'friendly'? It's not playing the game for you to be philandering about with another man while your husband's away at his work down in that sweltering heat. It—it isn't decent, Maisie."

"Oh, of course, I quite understand. You'd like me to have nothing to do with Captain Forrest. You're jealous—that's the long and short of it! You don't suppose I can't see that, do you?"—with a nasty little laugh.

"Jealous?" Brenda, devoted wife and mother, whose heaviest cross it was that she had had to send her two babies to England in order to remain with her adored husband, shrank back in disgust.

"You little fool!" she exclaimed, unconsciously echoing Sadie Brunner's original verdict. "Can't you understand that I'm speaking for your own sake, for yours, and Percy's—and the regiment's?"

"Oh, of course, the regiment!"

"Yes"—steadily. "We don't want a scandal in the Thirty-third. And I don't suppose"—more kindly—"that you really want to make a hash of Percy's life. It would, you know, if you let him down."

Maisie felt a little tremor of pride—that odd, peculiarly feminine pride which delights in the consciousness of power to sway the other sex. Already there were two men utterly devoted to her—Percy and Gayer Forrest. And when they met their mutual dislike would be the measure of that devotion. It would be rather exciting when they met, she thought.

"Maisie!" There was a wistful appeal in Mrs. Hartog's voice.

"Oh"—pettishly. "You needn't worry about me. I'm not going to let Percy down. But I don't propose, on that account, never to speak to any other man."

The older woman turned away disheartened. She had hoped to influence the girl—to find her more malleable when seriously taken to task. But she was running wild—had taken the bit between her teeth.

Brenda had small hope of being able to influence Gayer. She knew—which Maisie did not—all the circumstances that had combined to turn the most lovable personality in the regiment into a thwarted and embittered man, adding to his characteristic charm a quality of recklessness which made it doubly dangerous. The story of Gayer's love for the exquisite woman whom marriage with another man had suddenly set out of his reach for ever was common knowledge in the regiment. Only Maisie, being a new-comer to Dhurrapore, knew nothing about it. Nor was she ever likely to be initiated. The Thirty-third had its secrets, and one which every man and woman guarded with a tenacious loyalty, born of the affection which Gayer's essential lovableness never failed to inspire, was the story of that unhappy love affair.

It had been a grim little tragedy. Gayer had once been engaged to the woman in question. Then the *tertium quid* had come on the scene, and misunderstandings arose which had culminated in a violent quarrel and in Gayer's abruptly exchanging into another regiment, leaving the coast clear for the enemy. Later on, a man who was a friend of Gayer's and of the woman's as well, had contrived to disentangle the threads and had bolted off post haste to explain matters to the former and warn him that the woman he loved was on the point of marrying the *tertium quid*. Gayer applied for a few days' leave and got it—no one ever refused him anything he set his heart on—and he and the friend started off on a wild race against time.

But for once Gayer's luck was out. Floods and a breakdown on the line created delay when there was not a moment

to spare, and he reached his destination just in time to see the woman he loved returning from the English church—another man's bride. He had a brief vision of gold hair glimmering palely beneath a mist of bridal veil, of a white, ice-cold face, and of blue, desperate eyes that met his own in an agony of realisation. Gayer had carried that picture with him for many years now.

It was quite a commonplace little tragedy. The kind of thing which has happened hundreds of times and will happen hundreds more—until love is clear and strong and true enough to pierce through the first slight veil of misunderstanding before it thickens into a dense wall that may not be passed.

Brenda's heart ached whenever she thought of it. Later on, Gayer had managed to transfer back into the Thirty-third again, and she and her husband both counted him as one of their best friends. Nevertheless, she nerved herself to approach him on the matter of his friendship with Maisie Derafield.

"Philandering? Is that what you call it, *memsahib?*" he asked, when she had finished her indictment. His eyes challenged her with a humorous defiance.

She nodded.

"What else could you call it? You're not in love with her."

"It wouldn't be difficult to fall in love with her," he countered.

"She's married," Brenda pointed out repressively.

The quick, half-amused glance which he flung at her brought the colour to her cheeks.

"Oh, of course. And matrimony automatically precludes any falling in love outside the prescribed area, doesn't it?" he returned mockingly.

"Gayer! You're outrageous!" she protested.

"She's an attractive little devil, you know," he submitted tentatively.

"And unfortunately—eliminating the 'little'—so are you!" acknowledged Brenda. "Gayer, leave her alone! She's got a nice, well-meaning little husband stewing away down in the plains. He's the very soul of convention. He'd never understand, and he'd be horribly hurt without knowing why he was being hurt. Leave her alone."

"Your word is law, *memsahib*. You know that. I'll try—but whether I'll succeed or not, goodness only knows! Because—she *is* such an attractive little devil, you know." He smiled whimsically and went off, leaving Brenda divided in her mind betwixt confidence and doubt.

He did try. He might even have succeeded if only some one had not proposed a moonlight picnic to the Valley of the Silver Ring. The place derived its name from the fact that, owing to some curious configuration of the rocks which rimmed its lip, when the moon hung at a certain angle in the sky a complete circle of silver light was flung on to the opposite slope of the valley.

Moonlight permitting, a visit to the valley always formed part of the programme of entertainment mapped out for the visitor to Dhurrapore, and unthinkingly some one suggested that Mrs. Derafield ought to be taken there. The proposal was seized upon with avidity by the more youthful portion of the community—any excuse was good enough for a night's frolic—and arrangements for the picnic were quickly fixed up.

When the appointed evening came, Gayer Forrest, conscious of extreme virtue, manœuvred matters so that he and Maisie should not ride together, and when the cavalcade, laughing and chatting, set out from Dhurrapore towards the hills, the two were certainly as far apart as even Mrs. Grundy herself could have desired. But somehow, in the inevitable "sorting" process which occurs almost automatically in any gathering of men and women, this decorous arrangement speedily collapsed. Gayer found Maisie's chestnut mare abreast of his own mount, and when her saddle

slipped a trifle he had perforce to descend and tighten the girth. By the time matters were adjusted to her liking the remainder of the party were some distance ahead, and Maisie and Gayer might as well have been riding out towards the Valley of the Silver Ring alone together.

"Tell me about it, Gayer," she said, as she gathered up the reins. "About the circle, I mean. Is there a hole in the rocks, or what?"

"There are two rocks which curve towards each other," he explained. "And just at one particular angle the moonlight coming between throws an almost exact circle of light on the ground. A few minutes later, when the moon has moved on a little, the circle breaks—just as though you had chipped a piece out of it."

"How interesting."

"Yes. It's just a freak of nature. People have hung all sorts of stories on to it, of course—it's become quite a legendary spot. They say that if two lovers happen to be standing on the patch of moonlight just as the circle breaks, the engagement between them will be broken off."

"Supposing they were not—exactly—engaged?" suggested Maisie, gazing straight between her horse's ears.

"Oh, well, in that case, of course, it would mean a break of some kind." He laughed a little. "Probably they'd quarrel, and never get as far as an engagement."

"How horrible!" Maisie shivered. "It's rather uncanny, isn't it? I think I should be too frightened to stand in the patch of moonlight."

"You're safely married," submitted Gayer doggedly.

She threw him a fleeting glance.

"Percy and I might squabble and divorce each other," she returned lightly. "That's always a possibility, isn't it? I think I'd better keep out of the magic ring."

"Perhaps you had," he returned gravely.

Then, as though by mutual consent, they urged their horses into a canter and overtook the rest of the party.

They picnicked at the mouth of the valley, amid an inspiriting babel of fun and laughter; and it was not until the care-free repast was at an end that somebody exclaimed:

"There's the circle showing at last!"

Instinctively all heads were turned in the direction where it lay, although to most of the party the sight was a familiar one. The scene was peculiarly striking—the shadowed valley stretching between the hills like some dark chasm of mystery, crowned on either side with misshapen rocks that jutted up crudely against the mellow background of the sky, while on its lower slope gleamed a luminous disc, where the moonlight, streaming betwixt the boulders opposite, lay like a lambent pool of silver.

"You ought to go up and see it, Mrs. Derafield," suggested some one.

Maisie hesitated, then looked across at Gayer.

"Will you take me?"

For an instant an oddly conflicting expression flashed across his face—half eager, half ironical. Then he nodded, holding out his hand to help her to her feet, and a minute later they had plunged into the shadows of the valley.

It was a rough climb up the steep slope, scattered with loose stones and unexpected rocks, and Gayer slipped his arm through hers to guide her steps. The silence and darkness of the Eastern night closed round them like a curtain, seeming to cut them off from the rest of the world. Gradually, as they climbed, Maisie became vibrantly conscious of her aloneness with the man beside her—of the warmth of his arm against her side, of his quickened breathing, of the curious uneven note in his voice when he spoke. It was with a feeling akin to relief that she at last stepped into the circle of light. The movement seemed to snap that tingling sense of communion with which the darkness had enfolded them.

Gayer released her arm abruptly—aware, perhaps, that while they stood together in the brilliant moonlight, they were clearly visible to the others of the party waiting at

the valley's mouth. He remained silently beside her, staring down at her with eyes that held a smouldering fire, and, against her will, she felt drawn to meet his glance. A stifled cry escaped her. Something in his expression frightened her. It was as though the man were holding himself in leash—and the leash were slipping. She jerked her head aside.

"Don't look at me like that!" she whispered sharply. Almost in the same breath, she pointed suddenly to the edge of the circle. It was breaking—breaking slowly, as though a jagged rent had been torn in it.

"Oh!" The queer tenseness of the moment drew a cracked little scream from her. "Look! It's broken—while we're here!"

For a moment she stared fascinatedly at the remorseless shadow which had eaten into the circle of light. Then, overwhelmed with a sudden senseless terror, she turned and plunged headlong into the surrounding darkness. Gayer followed her, swift as thought. To lose track of her on that night-black hill-side would be madness. In a moment he had reached her side and caught her by the arm.

"Stop! Maisie! Don't run away from me!"

"I'm not! I'm not!" Her small hands fluttered seekingly and clutched his shoulders. "Only I'm frightened! What did it mean? The circle breaking while we were there?"

He gathered her into his arms and she lay against his breast like a spent child. The scent of her hair came to him through the darkness. He felt his senses leap, straining at the leash.

"God knows what it meant!" he said hoarsely. "But this is what I mean!" And, lifting her off the ground, he bent his head and kissed her again and again with a fierce possessiveness that shook her to the depths of her shallow little being.

"It won't part us—the circle?" she gasped, between his kisses.

"Part us? No! Of course it won't!"

Presently, with a last passionate embrace, he released her, and together they descended the steep side of the slope, to be greeted with a hail of chaff and laughter when they rejoined the rest of the picnic party.

"What a time you've been!"

"We nearly started for home and left you to follow us!"

Maisie was very silent on the homeward journey. She felt that she had come to a turning-point in her life—that the great decision lay ahead of her, the decision between Percy, her humdrum husband, and this splendid lover whose lonely life she, and she alone, could fill. There was something exhilarating in the very thought of how much he needed her. That Percy's lonely life might also demand a certain amount of filling didn't strike her. At least, there was no glamour in the idea. She lay awake half the night mentally concocting touching notes of farewell to her husband. That of course was the severance indicated by the broken circle. It was all quite clear to her now.

Meanwhile, Gayer Forrest, restored to normal by a whisky peg and his customary energetic ablutions, was cursing himself roundly.

"Moonlight and propinquity—oh, confound them!" he muttered, as he turned in for the night.

The next morning Maisie received a letter from her husband, telling her that he had at last been given leave and would join her at Dhurrapore.

The shock of the news was somewhat aggravated by her realisation of the fact that Percy would be arriving in three days' time, hard upon the heels of his letter—on the very night of a dance to which she was going.

However she consoled herself by the reflection that travelling was at all times a somewhat uncertain quantity in India and that, if Percy *did* happen to turn up in time for the dance in question, the fact that she would be dancing half

the programme with Gayer would probably simplify matters in the long run. It would open his eyes to the facts.

Apparently Fate had designed that the dance should be the vehicle for the opening of blind eyes, for Percy arrived at the Hartogs' bungalow in excellent time for dinner. He hugged his wife delightedly quite oblivious of the lack of ardour in her return greetings.

"I expect you'll hardly feel like going to a dance to-night, Percy, after your journey?" she suggested kindly.

"I'm feeling as fit as a fiddle now I'm out of that damnable heat," he returned with heartiness. "Besides I shouldn't like to keep you home. I'm not a spoil-sport."

Maisie had had no intention of remaining at home but she refrained from saying so. She wondered how Gayer would take this sudden appearance of her husband on the scenes, and when she caught sight of him across the ball-room, she was conscious of a thrill of suppressed excitement—the high-strung elation of impending crisis.

He was standing talking to a slender woman with mat-gold hair whom Maisie had not seen before—another new arrival, presumably. She wondered where she had come from, and frowned a little as she saw her touch Gayer lightly on the arm with an easy little gesture of intimacy, as though the two were old friends.

"I wonder who that woman in black is," said Maisie flatly.

Percy was struggling with a pair of white gloves, one of which had already burst. He was the kind of man whose gloves always *would* burst. Even the heat of the plains had failed to reduce his regrettable tendency towards adipose tissue. His glance followed the direction of his wife's.

"She's a Mrs. Maturin," he replied. "Some fellow told me. I saw her on the train—she's just come out from England."

Maisie's eyes rested on her non-committally. Deep within her, some primitive instinct warned her that the woman was

dangerous—inimical to herself. She was very beautiful, with the fine, ethereal beauty of a flower, delicately distinctive, and there was a curious air of finish about her, a perfectness of detail which Maisie dully recognised as being quite beyond her own powers to achieve.

Presently Gayer left the new-comer's side and came across to Maisie, who perforce introduced him to her husband. His expression was quite impenetrable as he scribbled his initials once only on her card. Once! Maisie felt a sudden contraction in her throat. She had kept free for him the usual generous number of dances, but it appeared that he had no intention of claiming them. She felt stunned—overwhelmed with blank, incredulous astonishment. The band struck up, and she saw him dancing with Mrs. Maturin. There was something curiously easy in the way they danced together—as though long habit had so accustomed them to each other's step that unconsciously they moved in absolute harmony.

"Aren't you engaged for this?"

Percy's rather high-pitched, throaty voice broke across the dazed bewilderment of her thoughts.

"N—no."

"Good biz!" He drew her out into the room. Like many shortish men inclined to rotundity, he danced quite well, but Maisie was suffocatingly conscious of Gayer's tall, supple figure, as it swung by at intervals, and of the slender woman in his arms, her gold head just as high as his heart.

Percy was fatuously delighted to find his wife had so many dances to spare.

"Good of you to have kept 'em for me, old thing," he exulted fondly. Maisie, crudely conscious of the blank white spaces sprawled across her dance card, could have struck him for his complacent idiocy. But, underneath her bewildered irritation, she was illimitably thankful that he was there to fall back on.

Enlightenment came while she was sitting alone in a screened-off corner, having dispatched Percy in search of

ices. On the other side of the screen a man and woman were talking.

"So Cynthia Maturin is back again!" There was a touch of surprise in the woman's voice. "I suppose that old affair goes on as before, then?"

"Oh, no. Haven't you heard?" The man's voice dropped to a gossipy, confidential note. "She's divorcing Maturin—he's been playing the fool since he retired, I believe. The decree nisi's through, and she's come out here till it's made absolute."

The woman laughed in a kindly, indulgent way.

"Then Gayer will come into his own at last."

Maisie sat bolt upright. Her shallow, active little mind was working swiftly, putting two and two together and making four of them. She welcomed the ice-laden Percy on his return with a new warmth of manner, and when, later on, Gayer Forrest came to claim his solitary dance, she girded on her armour and prepared to do battle for her self-respect.

Conversation flagged until the dance was over and they were sitting together in a curtained alcove. Then Gayer leaned forward and spoke abruptly.

"You'll be glad to have your husband here."

Maisie regarded him out of widely-opened eyes.

"Why—naturally!" with emphasis. "We've really had rather hard luck for a newly-married couple, don't you think?"

Gayer nodded.

"But that's India all over. Throws you together and then drags you apart. You'll get used to it"—grimly.

"Of course."

"And we've had a jolly little time together—you and I." There was a note of half-ironical, half-earnest appeal in his voice. Possibly it masked a certain well-founded nervousness. "A sort of *entr'acte*. We've kind of comforted each other, haven't we?"

The half-gods must needs steal away when the gods arrive.

In her own heart Maisie was perfectly aware of the fact that she was being given her *congé*. But, with her inherent faculty for humbugging both herself and other people, she triumphantly disregarded it.

"Indeed we have," she agreed cordially. "I'm going to tell Percy what a splendid 'substitute' you've been."

Gayer gasped, recovered himself with a small internal laugh, and then, in the immensity of his relief, asked if he might have another dance.

She shook her head regretfully.

"I'm afraid I haven't one to spare," she replied. "You see"—archly—"I kept all I could for Percy—just on the chance of his getting here in time."

The ability to refuse—without any fear of finding herself partnerless—restored her self-respect amazingly. As she climbed into the roomy, old-fashioned rickshaw to go home, she regarded Percy's tubby little figure with a critically possessive eye. He might not be exactly an Adonis—she firmly suppressed a rebellious memory of Gayer's symmetrical proportions—but, after all, he was *hers*. Her husband—bound to her by the indissoluble bonds of lawful wedlock. The reflection conveyed a reassuring feeling of permanence.

Percy slipped his arm round her waist.

"Glad to see me back, old girl, aren't you?" he said, with all a man's complacent confidence in the answer he would receive.

And Maisie, with a sudden rush of genuine feeling, answered fervently:

"Oh, *so* glad, Percy!"

She was quite clear in her own mind on the matter. He was stodgy and commonplace and dull—but oh! he was so *safe!*

Wherein the little fool showed her wisdom.

CHAPTER V

THE MADNESS OF SARGENSON

MILES COVENTRY strode along the dripping streets with a swinging, purposeful step, too much engrossed in his thoughts to heed either the rain which drove in his face or the occasional glance of swift surprise meted out to him by more than one passer-by.

He was well known by sight to the concert-going public, and it was a matter of some astonishment to the one or two people who recognised him to encounter him thus tramping through the rain with such supreme indifference to the possible effect of damp upon that golden voice of his.

But Coventry was a man first and a singer after, and hitherto he had found that fresh air and no fads had not hurt him at all. And on this particular afternoon he was going to see the woman he loved—going to congratulate both her and her husband upon the latter's return to the normal ways of life.

Inevitably his thoughts harked back over the years of his friendship with the two Sargensons. It had begun in their mutual student days, when they had all three been glowing young enthusiasts at the shrine of music, and had only strengthened through the years of professional work which had followed.

There had never been any question as to which of the trio of friends was the most gifted. René Sargenson, the brilliant young Norwegian pianist, had far outstripped the other two, flashing like a streak of flame into the front rank of executive musicians, while Coventry had merely achieved a safe footing as a popular baritone and Venetia a certain steadily increasing reputation as an accompanist.

But the friendship had held throughout their varying fortunes—held even when each of the two men knew that he loved Venetia, and afterwards when she was Sargenson's wife. From the first, Miles had realised that it was the Norwegian, with his nimbus of sun-gold hair and his changeful, sea-blue eyes—sometimes ablaze with fiery enthusiasm, sometimes mystic with dreams—to whom her heart was given. Wherefore he had set his teeth and held fast to the dual friendship which had made life so well worth living and never, by word or sign, allowed Venetia to guess the truth. She only thought of him as the staunchest pal in the world.

Then had come the war. René's father, Norwegian by birth, had been a naturalised Englishman, his mother of half-French, half-English extraction, and René, with the glorious ardours of both France and England stirring in his blood, had hurled himself into the fighting line with all the fervour of the queerly intermingled patriotism which fired him.

He and Coventry had been lucky enough to obtain commissions in the same regiment. Venetia had kissed them both when they went away, and through all that followed after, Coventry had carried in his heart the memory of her young face with its shy, brave eyes and of the maddening sweetness of her soft red lips against his cheek.

It had been he, not Venetia, who at first had tried to dissuade Sargenson from taking on a fighting risk before he need. There were so many with less rare gifts. Always, throughout the years in Flanders, Coventry had felt that save when death, which all men paid equally, was the price, the gods of his country were asking Sargenson—Sargenson, whose wonderful musician's hands meant everything to him—to risk a bigger stake than most men.

And till within a month of the armistice it seemed as though the gods themselves realised this, for René came and went unscathed, though he was worn fine by the hourly strain of it all on his hypersensitive nerves.

Then, one grey October day, a shell screamed its way across No Man's Land and buried itself somewhere beneath Sargenson's dug-out. There was nothing much left of the dug-out, and of Sargenson only the whimpering semblance of a man which cried like a child at the least sound and hid its face behind shaking hands.

But it was all over now—that horror of the past. The infinite skill of doctors and nurses and the healing hand of Time had combined to restore the wrecked nerves, and René Sargenson had been sent back to his home—cured.

Coventry quickened his steps involuntarily. It would be good to see his friend again—to grip his hand and read in his eyes the old familiar welcome. He ran eagerly up the steps of the Sargensons' house and pulled the bell, and a minute later he was holding Venetia's hands, pouring out joyous felicitations and inquiries for René all in the same breath.

"He's—he's not in yet," said Venetia at last.

Something in her voice—a note of fear, almost—struck him with a sudden doubt. Wasn't it all right? Oh, but it must be! She had written to him telling him that her husband was coming back to her, cured. And she had smiled her happiness and relief when he had first entered the room. Coventry searched her face. The acute anxiety of the last year had gone from it. The lines of strain were relaxed. But there was something else, new and unaccustomed, in it—a strange look of bewilderment tinged with underlying fear.

"What is it?" he said. "Isn't it all right?"

She was silent for a moment, struggling with herself. It was always an effort to Venetia to reveal her thoughts. She was naturally shy—shy with that intense, ineradicable reserve which is so often found in conjunction with big emotional capacity.

"Tell me, Venetia," urged Miles gently. "If there's anything wrong, you must let me share."

"Yes, I'll tell you," she said at last. "You'll have to know—sooner or later."

"What is it? You don't mean he has—changed—at all?" There was a hint of anxiety in the quick question.

For a moment her grey eyes grew radiant.

"No," she answered, an infinite content in her voice. "He is René—just René as he always used to be."

"Then—then——"

"It's his music!" she burst out violently. "That's gone!"

"Gone? But it couldn't be! He's out of practice, that's all. A few months will put it right. Remember, he hasn't touched a note while he was ill. Don't worry over that, Venetia."

She didn't seem to be listening. Her attitude was that of one who merely waited for him to finish uttering futilities.

"You don't understand," she said. "He went to the piano almost at once when he came back last evening and played—atrociously. It was like a child playing! No—worse! Wrong notes, chords that were just a hideous nightmare of sound. If he attempted a chromatic run or a quick arpeggio it was no more than a blur. *And he didn't know it—didn't hear it.* He sat there with that rapt look on his face—you know how he looks when he is playing divinely?" There was a little choke in her voice. Coventry nodded silently. "Well, like that—all eager and glowing, with his eyes shining. I *know* he thought he was making the most glorious music. And it was all just one mad, crazy discord. And then he jumped up and came across the room to me, bubbling over with delight. 'I haven't lost much, Venetia, have I?' he said. 'Isn't it amazingly good luck?' . . . Miles, it was ghastly!" She shuddered.

"What did you say? You didn't tell him?" he asked.

"*Tell him?* I can't tell him—I daren't! I think it would kill him." She paused, then went on tonelessly: "But that isn't all. He's made up his mind to give a recital—quite soon. And—and he's going to ask you to sing at it."

Before Miles could reply there came the sound of quick

footsteps. Venetia's upflung hand checked his answer on his lips.

The door flew open and Sargenson came in. Miles turned to greet him with a feeling akin to dread. But it was the old René whom he saw—the same slender, erect figure with its eager gesture and boyish face, the same sea-blue eyes with the veiled creative fire slumbering in their depths ready at any moment to flame into a glory of achievement. Coventry was struck anew with the sheer vitality of the man—the arresting vividness that seemed to radiate from him as the light from the sun.

"Miles, old chap!" And in a moment he was pump-handling Coventry's hand up and down like a schoolboy just home from the holidays.

"By Jove, it's good to be back!" he exclaimed. "We three—you and I and Venetia—just as we were before old Fritz came along and began tearing up the earth. Oh, it's good!"

He beamed at them both, and the talk rattled along, question and answer tumbling over each other in the spontaneous joyfulness born of reunion. Coventry was struck by the other's absolute normality. It seemed as though he had completely thrown off the oppression of the years of war with their final shattering of nerve and balance, emerging unscathed in both soul and body, and Miles wondered with a sudden pang of apprehension whether Venetia's story of his lost musicianship could possibly be some wild figment of her own imagination. She had been living at a strain for so long, with not only the fear of death before her, but with that other, hourly dread lest René should be incapacitated as an artist. Now, when the danger was past, it might well be the relief had proved too great for her, so that in her own mind she had conjured up into the reality of fact the fear which had beset her.

Coventry was beginning to feel convinced that this was the explanation. In a way he felt thankful—thankful that Rene's great gift was unimpaired. But of course it meant

that Venetia must be looked after—cared for and nursed back to health.

"I ought to play better than I ever did before." Sargenson's ardent voice broke across the other man's anxious thoughts. "The experience of war, the closeness to life and death—the *sounds* I heard, Miles! I shall find them all taking form, colouring the new stuff I mean to write. And my fingers haven't lost their cunning, either. It's astonishing!" With his habitual impetuosity he crossed swiftly to the piano. "Listen!"

Coventry knew one tense, palpitant instant of unspeakable fear, of surging hope. Then came certainty—indescribably hideous certainty.

His teeth clenched in the effort to drive from his face every atom of expression which might betray the truth, he stood and listened to the discordant riot of sound which poured from beneath René's fingers.

The man's hands swept the keys with what seemed to be just their old facility. And the result was a rhapsody of crazed musicianship. It was like some horrible parody of Sargenson at his best. Meaningless successions of notes played with a delicate, appealing tenderness of touch; barbarous crashes of dissonant intervals which smote the ear, thundered out with all the precision, the wonderful capacity for sonorous tone, of fingers that had been wont to draw the whole pulsating value from every chord they struck.

Coventry listened appalled. And as though to add a last *macabre* touch to the scene, René's face was the face of an immortal—transfigured into a sublime serenity, with rapt eyes that held the mystic radiance of the musician's fire. Watching him, Miles knew that, in spirit, Sargenson was caught away into familiar worlds of music, mentally aware of exquisite melodies which he believed himself to be interpreting to the two who listened. And through some obscure severance of faculty this chaotic hotch-potch of discord was the result!

Coventry's gaze slid from the man at the piano to the woman who was his wife. She was sitting quite still, her small hands clenched tightly together, her face a blank, emotionless mask. Presently, when the last chaotic notes had jarred into silence, René looked across at her with the accustomed eager questioning in his eyes.

"Well? Do you like it?" he asked.

Coventry felt the sweat break out on his skin. And then it seemed to him Venetia did a rather wonderful thing. She sprang up and ran across the room—just as he had seen her do a hundred times in the old days when René had been playing to them, and had surpassed himself—and took her husband's outstretched hands in hers.

"Oh, René!" she exclaimed. "It was wonderful!"

Her smile held the same glad triumph in his work as it had been wont to do. Her voice seemed to quiver with excitement. It was the most magnificent piece of acting that Coventry had ever seen.

And it satisfied Sargenson. He smiled contentedly at his wife.

"I'm glad you like it," he said. "I think I shall include it in the programme for my recital. By the way, Miles, has Venetia told you I'm going to open with a recital? And I want you, of course, old son. It will be like the good old times, our giving a recital together again."

Coventry never quite knew how he got through the discussion that followed—the plans and suggestions for the projected concert. Only, when at last Sargenson went off to speak to some one on the telephone, and he was left alone with Venetia, he found his limbs trembling. He passed his hand across his forehead and drew it away wet.

"You see how it is with him."

She spoke quietly. She had had the night in which to accustom herself, more or less, while Coventry's mind was still staggering under the shock.

"Good God, Venetia!" he broke out. "It's the most ghastly thing conceivable! Has he gone tone-deaf?"

She shook her head.

"No. It's not that."

"Then, what is it?"

"That's what I was asking myself all through the night." She smiled rather wanly. "Then this morning René began practising. Practising!" A little shiver ran through her body. "So I slipped away and went straight off to see Sir Raeburn Fores. He's the man who knows more about René's case than any one else. And I told him just what had happened."

"What did he say?"

"*He knew.* He had heard René trying the piano one day —just before they sent him home."

"Then if he knew, why didn't he prepare you?" demanded Coventry, indignantly.

"He did. He wrote to me from his place in the country four days ago. The letter came this afternoon! Probably it was dropped and left lying in some dusty corner of the village post office. Anyway, through somebody's carelessness it was delayed."

"Well, what did Fores tell you? Is there any hope of René's recovery?"

"Yes, there is—hope. But Sir Raeburn says he can't tell in the least how long it may take. He says he might recover suddenly—any day, to-morrow. Or"—her voice shook a little—"he may never recover at all."

Coventry stifled an ejaculation of dismay.

"But he's sane—as sane as you or I."

"Yes, he's sane—every other way. But there's some obscure mental condition, nevertheless. Couldn't you see that all the time he was making that dreadful noise on the piano, he himself, in his own mind, was hearing real music? Wonderful chords and melodies, just as he used to. *And he*

thinks he is expressing them. It's as though some cell in his brain were lying dormant, not working, so that the connecting link between his thought and the expression of it is broken. That's how Sir Raeburn described it."

Coventry nodded.

"Yes. That describes the thing exactly. It's appalling. Worse than if he'd been injured physically. . . . Venetia, who's to tell him?"

"*No one!*" The words ripped out from her white lips. "I won't have him told! If he knew— I think he'd go mad. Sir Raeburn says the only chance is to carry on—as if he were all right."

"But—but—— It can't go on! Some one *must* tell him."

"No," she repeated firmly. "No one shall tell him. He's cured, really. Everything else has come back. His brain's working quite normally every other way. And his music will come back. It—oh, *it must!*"

For a moment she faltered, blenching from a possibility too horrible to contemplate. Then she steadied again.

"It will come back," she reiterated. "That one brain-cell or whatever it is that isn't acting will recover, just as the rest of his brain has recovered. It isn't as though he'd ever received any physical injury to his head. It's only a matter of time—I'm sure of it. And meanwhile, I'm going to pretend it *is* all right——"

"Pretend?"

"Yes. Behave exactly as though he could play as he used to do—until he actually does play like that."

"But you'll find it unbearable!"

"There is nothing unbearable," she said quietly, "if you choose to bear it."

Coventry was conscious of a quick thrill of admiration for her pluck. But, none the less, he knew that her plan was impracticable. Fores' advice might be the counsel of perfection, but it wasn't feasible in a present-day world.

"I'm afraid you can't keep him in ignorance," he objected gently. "Don't you see, there's this matter of the recital. He can't give one. And he'll have to be told why."

"If he's determined to give it, he shall do so," she answered doggedly.

"Impossible! He'd be booed off the platform."

"No. Listen, Miles, I've a plan. And I want your help."

"You know you can count on that,"—steadily.

She rewarded him with a smile.

"I do know it," she answered swiftly. "And I've relied on that in making my plans. Of course, I shall dissuade René from giving a recital if it's any way possible—on the grounds that he's out of practice, and that it would be better to wait. But if he persists in the idea, then he must be allowed to give it. And I want you, Miles, to sing for him."

She paused, looking at him anxiously.

"Will you?" she added.

"Of course I will, if you wish it. But I can't see—Oh, it's a hopeless plan, Venetia! The audience would almost riot. There'd be a frightful commotion if René went on and played—as he played just now."

"I don't think so. His public love him. And I'm banking on that love. Anyway"—looking at him with steady eyes—"I shall risk it."

"There might be a very unpleasant scene," he began.

But she interrupted him.

"I shall risk it," she repeated.

Coventry stared at her amazedly. He had always regarded Venetia as exceptionally timid, nervously inclined to retreat from anything that might thrust her into prominence. Above all, he knew how she shrank instinctively from conflict or unpleasantness of any kind. And here she was composedly preparing to risk a scene from which a much bolder spirit than hers might flinch.

"My dear," he said, and there was a great tenderness in his voice. "You've no idea what a dissatisfied audience is

like. People want their money's worth, and an audience that doesn't get it is like a baulked beast of prey. You haven't the nerve for that sort of thing."

"I've the nerve to stand by René—by my husband."

"And if there's a row—how about René? He'd have to know then."

"Why should he? Don't you understand that he doesn't realise in the least how he's playing? He wouldn't realise it any the more for a few cat-calls and booings. He'd merely think it was a disturbance intentionally organised by some one who wanted to do him a bad turn."

Coventry made a gesture of despair.

"Oh, you're impossible!" he declared.

But nothing that he urged could shake her determination.

Equally she herself was unable to dissuade Sargenson from his purpose of giving a recital. He was full of enthusiasm over the idea. Before Venetia could choose the moment to introduce her gentle suggestion that it might be better to defer the date of his first public reappearance a little while, he had booked the concert hall, and advertisements flared forth in all the daily papers.

Applications for tickets poured in. Within a week every seat in the house was sold—and could have been sold twice over. Sargenson himself was radiant—joyously excited as a schoolboy, and as the day approached his spirits rose ecstatically.

Meanwhile to Venetia each day meant twenty-four hours of acute mental torture.

By dint of infinite tact and persuasion she had induced her husband not to play before any one prior to the day fixed for the recital, and with the solitary exception of Miles Coventry not even Sargenson's most intimate friends had the least inkling of the real state of things.

Coventry, loyally prepared to assist at the recital by singing, could see no glimmer of hope on the horizon.

"We're heading straight for an almighty crash, Venetia,"

he told her. "It would have been better to tell him the truth, and stand the consequences."

"No." She was steadfast in her belief. "Sir Raeburn said that he might recover any day, so each day gives a possible chance of his recovery before the concert. And crash or no crash, he's got to be shielded from the knowledge which might send him stark mad."

. . . . . .

Coventry had come off the platform to the thunder of whole-hearted applause. The group of songs he had given had been enthusiastically received, and the audience, its appetite pleasantly whetted, was now waiting good-humouredly in anticipation of hearing the pianist who had been London's idol previous to the war.

When he re-entered the artists' room Miles found that Sargenson was chatting cheerily with a friend. Venetia, who had been accompanying the songs, turned back at the doorway. Her face was very white, but her eyes shone steadily like two unwavering stars.

"I'm going to speak to them," she said in a low voice, gesturing towards the body of the hall whence came the sounds of impatient clapping.

"Do you mean you've persuaded René not to play?" asked Coventry eagerly.

"No. But I'm going to tell them the truth before he goes on. He thinks I'm announcing a change in the programme. I've worked that. Only don't let him overhear what I'm saying."

With a vague instinct to avert the crisis, to delay matters, he caught at her arm as she passed him. But she was gone—through the door, and up the steps on to the platform before he could stop her.

She looked very young and girlish as she faced the big audience, standing there with her hands hanging loosely

clasped in front of her, her small head flung back a little, reminding one of some sensitive wild creature at bay.

A round of applause greeted her, and died down into an attentive silence. Then in a tense, quiet voice, every note of which carried to the furthermost ends of the hall, she told the big audience which had gathered to hear her husband play exactly what had happened.

"He has lost his wonderful gift fighting for us—fighting for you and me. It may come back some day. We don't know. But I know it would kill him to realise that he had lost it. Please, will you help me?" There was something poignantly appealing in the simple, direct question. "Will you try and pretend—pretend he is playing just as he used to play?"

An utter silence followed.

The great assemblage sat tongue-tied, breathlessly still, each component soul of it pierced by the raw tragedy of the thing, yet helplessly seeking for direction, unable to articulate the emotion which stirred it. The incident was so unparalleled, the circumstances so piteous.

Coventry, listening to the brave little speech and the blank silence which ensued, was on his knees in spirit to Venetia. The sheer courage of her!

And then a shout from the gallery voiced the dumb passion of pity of the multitude.

"We will, lady! You trust us! . . . Sargenson! Sar——" The name was caught up by a hundred eager voices, and went echoing up to the rafters in a mighty roar.

"Hark! They're calling for me!"

Sargenson's face held a look almost of exaltation as he sprang up the platform steps and stood bowing in response to applause which seemed to rock the hall. His eyes were full of tears. His heart, too. In the artists' room Venetia leaned helplessly against the wall, with closed eyelids, her whole being concentrated into the single sense of hearing.

René sat down to the piano, and his hands swept the keys in a few bars of prelude. For an instant the audience stiffened into tense, stricken silence at the jangle of impossible chords. Then, magnificently loyal to the woman who had trusted them, they drowned the cacophony of sound in a tumult of cheers and clapping.

Sargenson bent his head gravely in response, and began to play. To the mute listeners who had loved the man and his music, the poignancy of the scene was almost too great to be borne. The man himself so little changed—his fine head thrown back, the slanting sunlight making a halo of his tawny hair, his ardent eyes adream with inspiration—whilst all the time the once wonderful hands, reft of their magic, poured forth a flood of discord.

. . . Suddenly, from somewhere outside, a street or two away, came the terrific blast of an explosion, submerging every other sound in a tornado of annihilating noise. The great concert-hall trembled under the concussion; its windows splintered into atoms. A woman at the back of the hall screamed shrilly. Some frightened attendant stupidly shouted "Fire!" In a moment panic seized the whole audience, and they surged up from their seats, stampeding towards the exits.

At the first impact of thunderous detonation Sargenson sprang up from the piano. For an instant he stood rocking on his feet, his hands pressed against his ears. He felt as though his head would burst. Then, all at once, his brain cleared. He realised the frightful menace of that panic-stricken rush towards the doors and that he, and he alone, could check it.

He strode to the edge of the platform.

"Stop! Keep your seats!" he shouted, his voice ringing out like the call of a trumpet above the frightened cries and groans which ascended from the struggling crowd. "It's all right! *It's all right,* I tell you!"

He swung round to the piano, and the next moment a

torrent of glorious music, blithe with melody, swinging with rhythmic chords, streamed out into the hall.

The mass of pushing, struggling humanity checked abruptly. With suddenly uplifted faces, still white from recent terror, they stared towards the platform in sheer stupefaction.

Sargenson's madness had passed! He was once more the inspired musician they knew and loved. The miracle of it held them still and silent in stunned amazement.

Presently, as the glowing music throbbed on unbroken, they began to steal back quietly, one by one, to their places. And each man's thought was, "Sargenson has come back!"

In the artists' room Venetia, spent with effort, was holding on desperately to Miles Coventry's strong, kindly hand.

"It's been worth it all, Miles," she said shakily. "Because—now—he need never know!"

CHAPTER VI

A DANGEROUS WOMAN

1

Dear Peter,

I'm just off to seek fresh fields and pastures new. Italy's altogether too elegant for the likes of me, and if the spars of the old tub I've chartered for the purpose hold together, I'm proposing to spend the next few months cruising about in the South Seas. But before I shake off the dull dust of these civilised parts, here's just a word to the wise! Recall that blessed son and heir of yours home to England, and do it quick. *The climate here's a deal too heating to the blood—young blood, anyway—and if you want to save his soul alive, you'll get him home.*

To put it concisely, young Toby's in the toils of Dolores di Ravoglini, an extremely beautiful person who lives in a gorgeous villa on the Bay of Naples. An adventuress, of course, but unique in her own line. You don't see her anywhere in public. In fact, current gossip has it that she never goes outside the grounds of her villa. But she's ruined more good fellows than one cares to think of, and apparently her tastes are catholic. I, personally, know of a rising young barrister who, since his acquaintance with the fair Dolores, will rise no more, and equally of a certain highly-placed personage who was only hurried home by his suite in time to save a European scandal. She's a dangerous woman, and she'll swallow Toby at a gulp—make no more of him than an hors d'œuvre. *So my advice to you, old son, is—get him home. You're asking for trouble if you leave him to his own devices out here any longer. Yours ever, Jim.*

The man to whom this letter was addressed read it through for the second time, and the clouded expression for which it was responsible deepened on his face. It was an arresting face—that of a man of forty-eight or thereabouts—finely chiselled and sensitive, with keen grey eyes and a clean-shaven mouth closing in a straight, stern line which was oddly contradicted by the sweet-tempered uplift at its corners.

"Dolores!"

Peter Bettington repeated the name aloud. It was curious that from the shock of dismay with which the letter had smitten him, the one salient point which emerged, with a surprising clarity, was the fact that the woman who was evidently in a fair way to spoil his son's life bore the same name as the woman who had played a part in the days of his own youth, nearly five-and-twenty years ago.

A quarter of a century is a big slice out of life, but to Peter, looking back down the vista of the years, it did not seem as long as that since the time when he and that other Dolores—Dolores Daventry—had played at love together throughout the whole of a golden summer by the Cornish sea. He could see her now, with the eyes of his mind, as clearly as he had seen her then with the adoring eyes of ardent youth—a slip of a girl with night-black hair and cream-white skin, like some wonderful black-and-white etching, looking up at him with the dark, fringed pools of eyes which had been the gift of her Italian mother. Born of mixed English and Latin parentage, the south had predominated unmistakably in her temperament. She had all the fire and passion and allure of her maternal ancestry.

How he had worshipped her! Probably—almost certainly—he would have married her if Barbara Grey had not chanced to cross his path just then—Barbara, restfully simple and sincere, with serene blue eyes and nondescript fair hair, and that frank, half-boyish camaraderie and charm which seems to be the peculiar heritage of the Englishwoman. The strange, indefinable call of race had to be

reckoned with. Unconsciously Bettington reacted to it, and before long, with suddenly clarified vision, he was wondering how on earth the exotic, feverish beauty of Dolores could ever have appealed to him. The glamour and the spell were gone.

Subsequently, when his engagement to Barbara Grey was announced, Dolores had been one of the first to offer her felicitations—with an insouciant gaiety which had effectually disposed of the idea that her heart had been any more seriously involved than Peter's own, and during the years of perfect happiness which succeeded his marriage he had practically forgotten all about her. Once he remembered vaguely hearing that she had married, and later still came the news that she had divorced her husband, neither of which facts had seemed to be even remotely connected with his own life.

And now this gravely warning letter from Jim Burnaby, with its mention of the name Dolores, had suddenly reminded him of things which had long faded from his memory. It was only a coincidence, of course, the similarity of name. But for a moment it brought the past vividly before him. He could see again the gaunt, stark cliffs of Cornwall, with the dazzling blue sea breaking into a smother of flying spume against their ragged sides, recapture the clean, sharp tang of brine in the air as it mingled with that faint, elusive scent of stephanotis which had been wont to signify for him the presence of Dolores.

He brushed his hand across his eyes, deliberately dismissing the recollections which had suddenly risen up from the past and confronted him. The present demanded his attention with an urgency which was overwhelming. Jim Burnaby was no alarmist. On the contrary, he was about as tolerant and level-headed a man as you could find, and Peter knew surely that if Burnaby considered matters serious enough to counsel Toby's immediate recall from Italy, the position of affairs must be critical.

His brows drew together. Since Barbara's death, five years previously, it had been round Toby that his whole thought and desire had centred. The boy was all that was left to him—son of the woman he had worshipped, the living link with his dead happiness. For a considerable time he debated with himself how best to meet the crisis which had arisen. Of course, he could follow Burnaby's suggestion and summon the lad home. But supposing Toby did not choose to answer the summons? Then, while the danger deepened hourly, valuable time would have been wasted to no purpose.

This woman, this adventuress—Dolores di Ravoglini—could be counted on to exert all her power to keep him at her side until she had either married or ruined him. With a grim twist of the mouth Peter acknowledged that the terms were practically synonymous. And the power which a woman of her type could wield over a young man of Toby's quick, eager temperament was almost incalculable. Without doubt, she was fully aware that the boy was heir to a big fortune. She would not readily allow him to escape.

Suddenly Peter came to a decision. Toby's welfare was the one thing in life that mattered to him. He was taking no risks. He would go to Italy himself instead of wiring the boy to return home—a mandate which might, or might not, be obeyed!

2

The blow had fallen at last, after a long, fruitless discussion betwixt father and son in the hotel bedroom overlooking the bay. Toby had been first aloof, with a reticence Peter tried in vain to combat, then irritable, like a cornered animal. Finally, with a sort of desperate pride and determination, he had flung down the gauntlet.

"I can't go home with you. I've asked her to marry me, and she's consented."

Only a quick compression of the lips showed that Peter had heard. It was some minutes before he spoke.

"You think you're in love with her, I suppose?" he said at last.

Toby's blue eyes—so heart-shakingly like the eyes of the woman who lay sleeping in the quiet little Cornish churchyard—blazed back at his father.

"I don't think. I know," he answered shortly.

Peter nodded quietly.

"We'll accept that, then." Toby stared at him doubtfully, hardly believing his ears. Then his young mouth hardened, as his father went on swiftly: "Do you know—have you realised—what kind of woman she is?"

"Of course, you've heard tales!" burst out Toby, passionately chivalrous as only youth can be. "There's always gossip about a woman as beautiful as Dolores. But one needn't believe it. I *don't* believe it"—stubbornly.

"I've made a good many inquiries. I'm afraid there's very little said about her that isn't true." Bettington paused, then added deliberately: "You can't marry her, Toby."

"I can, and I will!" returned Toby swiftly. "Oh! I know what you think—that I'm too good for her, that she's not fit to marry me—all that hard-as-nails Puritanical rubbish——"

"No," interrupted Peter sharply. "You're wrong. What I'm thinking"—his eyes, fixed on Toby's face, narrowed suddenly—"is that Dolores di Ravoglini is not a fit woman to put in your mother's place. You think that, too, don't you?"

The boy turned a white face towards him.

"That's not fair," he cried in a stifled voice. "It's not fair."

"It's true," answered Peter, looking away from the hurt misery of the blue eyes.

Toby stood still, clenching and unclenching his hands. Then:

"I'm going to marry her," he said jerkily. "I'd be a skunk to throw her over. You can't let a woman down like that. Besides, she's—she's been wonderful to me—you don't know——" He turned away abruptly and flung out of the room.

Peter looked after him regretfully. He could sense the turmoil of Toby's emotions—the passion which Dolores had waked in him warring against his instinctive, clean young summing-up of essential values. That reference to his mother—to Barbara! Peter had forced himself to make it, thrusting sheer at the boy's heart, and it had got home. But though it had cut Toby pretty badly, it was a useless weapon, returning blunted from contact with the shield of that fierce, boyish honour which could see only shame in the thought of discretion and retreat.

With a brief sigh Bettington rose from his chair and strolled out on to the balcony, staring with unseeing eyes across the blue waters of the bay. It was up to him to save Toby from the snare in which his feet were tangled—to save him, somehow. The boy's attitude, his very straightness, would add a hundredfold to the difficulties of the task before him. And yet—Peter admitted it with a brief, whimsical smile—he would not have had him one whit less scrupulous, would not have sacrificed an iota of that burning loyalty to a woman who had no understanding of loyalty beyond its mere trade value to herself.

An hour later found Peter walking up the broad drive that led to Villa Violetta. It was the hottest part of the afternoon, and he walked slowly. He had chosen this time so that he should be certain of finding Dolores at home. No one who could help it went out at that hour of the day in Naples, and if the *signora* had not yet finished her *siesta,* he was prepared to wait until she had.

The villa gardens were ablaze with flowers—the mingled perfume of them came borne to him on the drowsy, sun-warmed air—luscious, heady scent of southern bloom, almost

overpowering in its sweetness. Presently he reached the villa itself, its white stucco almost hidden beneath a cloud of blossom. A deep silence pervaded the whole place, and the reverberation of the bell, as he pulled the old-fashioned handle, seemed to break through the stillness with a curious suggestion of violence.

An old Italian woman, her sallow face wrinkled wherever a wrinkle could find place, her dark eyes bright and glancing, like a robin's, peered at him scrutinisingly. Could he see the *signora?* She shook her head doubtfully. Peter smiled at her—that lovable, half-whimsical smile of his which so few women could resist—and the old serving-woman melted. Yes, it was true—the *signora* had finished her *siesta.* Perhaps she would receive the *signore inglese.* The name? A swift expression of surprise crossed her face as Peter gave his name. It was quite familiar to her. But this was not the same Signore Bettington whom she had learned to know as a daily visitor at the villa. A sudden suspicion leaped into her shrewd old eyes and her manner hardened.

"I will go and see," she said harshly, and abruptly closed the door in his face, leaving him standing alone outside in the silence and warmth and fragrance.

Presently the door reopened and she beckoned him to enter. The Signora di Ravoglini would see him. He followed her into the grateful coolness of the villa, through a pillared hall with tessellated floor of variously hued marble, the white limbs of statuary gleaming fugitively from shadowy corners, into a cool, wide room, with the same chequered flooring, and enfolded in the semi-darkness of windows closely shuttered to keep out the heat. In the centre of the room a fountain plashed refreshingly, the figure of a laughing Cupid holding aloft a vessel from which the water sprayed into a basin of green-veined marble, cooling the parched air.

For a moment, accustomed to the sunlit glare outside, Peter could distinguish but little. Then, his eyes adapting themselves to the half-light, he discerned an immense divan

at the further end of the room, heaped with rich-hued cushions, from which a woman had just risen and now stood awaiting him. As he approached she said something in rapid Italian to the old serving-woman, who nodded and, proceeding to one of the windows, opened the shutters, letting in a stream of light before she quitted the room.

The light fell full on the figure of the woman who had risen from the divan, and Peter, in the act of advancing towards her, halted suddenly.

"Dolores!"

The name escaped him involuntarily. Older, of course, but still slim and pliant and amazingly beautiful, Dolores di Ravoglini was the same Dolores he had known five-and-twenty years ago. She regarded him through half-closed eyes.

"Yes. Didn't you guess?" It was the familiar liquid Italian voice—the voice that had once been able to set all his pulses racing. Now it left him unmoved, though he was still conscious of its beauty—its supple sweetness of intonation—and able to estimate its probable effect on Toby.

"I thought you must have guessed, Peter," she went on, rallyingly, "and come to see what I was like now."

He looked at her consideringly.

"I think that's what I did come for," he said. "To see what you are like."

"Well?"—challengingly. She was sure of herself, sure of her undimmed beauty.

"I can't answer that now," he replied gravely. "I haven't found out yet—what you are like."

Something—some swift change passed over her. Her eyes hardened.

"What do you mean?" she asked sharply. She sank back on to the divan and gestured towards a chair. "Sit down and tell me what you mean?"

"I mean that I don't know yet whether you are going to be generous—and fair, or whether——"

She snapped her fingers.

"Ah! I understand, my friend. Toby has told you that I am to be his wife."

"He's told me that he has asked you to be his wife," corrected Peter quietly.

A latent fire woke to life in her sombre eyes. She smiled at him with covert triumph.

"And I have accepted his offer. I've had my day—and a very good day it has been, too! Now I think it is time I settled down and became respectable."

"At Toby's expense?"—dryly.

"Oh, I shall make him happy. Do not worry yourself on that score, *amico mio.*"

"For a year—two years, perhaps," admitted Peter. "After that, he'll begin to realise things. He won't thank you, then, for spoiling his life."

"I didn't thank you—for spoiling mine."

There was a new note in her voice, something poignant and anguished—the accumulated pain of years suddenly rushing headlong to the surface. Her great eyes, fixed on his face, held naked accusation. He started up, incredulous, white-lipped, conscious of a great and terrible fear.

"Dolores! Do you know what you are saying? Did you—*mean* that?"

But the revealing moment had passed. She lowered her lids for an instant and when she looked at him again the expression in her eyes was merely derisive.

"Ah! I see you are just as conceited as most other men, *amico*—only too ready to believe that some poor woman has been breaking her heart for you all these years! But you need not reproach yourself on my account. I have had many loves, many romances, since that summer in Cornwall." She laughed amusedly—a little ripple of sound that lightly ridiculed his sudden uprush of horrified self-reproach.

Her laughter jarred on him.

"I've no doubt you have," he responded savagely. "But I

haven't any intention of letting you add Toby to the number. I came here to ask you to release him."

"But why?"—in accents of astonishment.

"You know why. For every reason in the world."

She shook her head.

"We love each other. Here, in Italy, one knows better how to love than in your cold grey England."

"Then if you love him, give him up," interposed Peter eagerly. "Give him his freedom, Dolores."

"Has he asked for it?"—quietly.

Reluctantly he admitted the truth.

"No. He considers himself bound."

An odd expression flitted across her face.

"He is more honourable than his father was," she said tauntingly.

"And do you intend to hold him to that honour?"

"Of course. We are betrothed."

"An engagement can be broken," he hazarded.

Her eyes flashed dangerously.

"Men do not break their engagements, of whatever kind, with Dolores di Ravoglini, my friend."

She was as elusive as a butterfly, and Peter realised that he was making no headway. She was not prepared to listen to any appeal that he might make. At length, reluctantly, he resorted to the usual ultimate solvent of such situations.

"I'm a rich man. That, of course, you know. I'm prepared to buy Toby's freedom."

She sprang to her feet.

"But I'm not prepared to sell it! I've told you"—with a smile—"I want to marry again—to lead the life of an English lady of position. It is high time I settled myself. Though, even so"—a secret mockery in her eyes—"if Toby himself asks me to release him, I will. . . . But on no other condition. You see"—amiably—"I am very fair. I do not even wish to hold him against his will."

She had named the one contingency which could never

arise. If Toby's freedom depended on his asking for it himself, he would never get it. *"You can't let a woman down like that,"* he had said, with that reckless, unthinking boyish loyalty of his.

There was nothing for it but to accept defeat. Peter left the villa, walking very slowly, with bent head.

3

It was a chance remark overheard at the English club which first suggested the idea. A couple of men were gossiping together within Peter's hearing, and Dolores' name cropped up. One of the men laughed cynically.

"The Ravoglini? Nothing doing nowadays. She's out for the propriety stakes—marriage and a good position. Didn't you know? She's nabbed young Bettington."

"Why, he's only a youngster," protested the other.

The first speaker shrugged his shoulders.

"True. But he or any other man would serve, provided he can give her what she wants."

"Any other man!" The words were like a searchlight flashed across the dark confusion of Peter's troubled thoughts, and in an instant he realised that here was the one possible way by which Toby could be saved. He had as much, indeed, far more to offer than his son. He wondered curiously why this solution of the problem had never occurred to him throughout these last few days of feverish, concentrated thought. It was a terrible way out, involving the complete surrender of his own life. But it meant the salving of Toby's—and in the natural course of events Toby had much longer to live than he, with all the good years ahead of him. Peter was determined that they should be good years.

He stated his proposition very simply to Dolores, not troubling to conceal its object.

"It would effectually cure Toby of his infatuation," he added. "And his honour would be unhurt. I don't want

to hurt that"—swiftly. "It must be you who break off the engagement."

"It would certainly cure him," admitted Dolores dryly.

She had listened with downbent eyes, her pale, immobile face devoid of any sign of emotion.

"And you would promise to make me your wife, instead?" she continued.

"I would make you my wife," replied Peter steadily. "You may trust me, Dolores. I'd do all I could to compass your happiness."

"Ah, yes! You would what you call 'play the game'—I am sure of that."

He regarded her with faint surprise.

"Yet the other day you practically accused me of being less honourable than my son."

"The other day? Ah! The other day"—softly—"I was feeling sad. And sometimes when one is sad one tries to hurt other people and make them sad, too. I don't know why." She laid her hand lightly on his. "I did not mean it, *amico mio.*"

He checked a sharp, instinctive movement to withdraw his hand, and his expression altered. He looked as a man may look who had suddenly come in contact with a snake. There was irrepressible repugnance in his eyes.

She was watching him quietly.

"You are quite ready to marry me, Peter?"

"I am ready," he answered steadily.

"Yet you don't like me," she flashed at him suddenly.

The grave grey eyes met hers without flinching.

"No," he said. "I don't like you."

She frowned a little.

"I'm afraid you'd make a poor sort of husband," she remarked uncertainly. "I'm not quite sure that the prospect is altogether attractive."

A sudden fear caught Peter in its grip. He had so nearly won, so nearly carried Toby into safety!

"I'll be any sort of husband you wish," he said roughly. "You shall have the rest of my life to do as you like with."

She surveyed him quizzically, between narrowed lids.

"It's a handsome offer," she continued, with a slight shrug of supple shoulders.

"It's everything I have to give"—quietly.

For a moment she was silent, looking downwards and trifling with a long string of wonderful pearls that hung down almost to her knees, while Peter waited in tense anxiety. At last she lifted her eyes.

"And what should you do about your property—your estate in England—Betridge Court?"

His jaw seemed to square itself.

"The boy lives there," he said implacably. "That's the only thing I won't give you—my home. That's got to be kept clean. . . . But you shall have everything else in the world that you want—a villa here, and in France, a house in London—what you will."

"I want—love." She spoke very low. "Have you forgotten how to love, Peter?"

He steadied himself. If he were to win out he must fulfil his side of the bargain to the uttermost demand—yield her everything. Everything—except Toby and Betridge.

"No. I've not forgotten."

"Then kiss me."

He stooped his head and his lips met hers. Her eyes closed and she shivered a little in his arms, catching her breath. Then she drew quietly away from him.

"Well?" he queried. "Have you decided? Will you marry me?"

"I'll tell you—in three days' time. I must—I must have a little while to think. But come and see me. We must get to know each other—learn each other all over again, Peter."

He acquiesced. There was no other course open to him. For two days he came and went at the villa, schooling him-

self to pay the cost of Toby's freedom. He would come away with his brain reeling, the scent of stephanotis stifling in his nostrils, the sound of her low, liquid voice and the plash of the fountain lingering maddeningly in his ears.

The second evening, as he was leaving her, she leaned towards him in all the soft abandonment of surrender.

"I think I have decided, Peter," she said, a little break of utter tenderness in her voice. "To-morrow—to-morrow I will give you—everything I have to give." She used his own words.

He went out into the night with the set mouth of a man who has won, but in the winning lost all. A photograph of Barbara in a little folding leather case stood on his dressing-table at the hotel. It had gone everywhere with him since he had had to go alone. He lifted it and stared down at it with eyes which held a sick agony of pain.

"Barbara—you'll understand!" He spoke aloud, as though she were in the room with him. Then he closed the case, with a quick deliberation shutting from sight the face of the only woman who had ever counted in his life.

It was not until the following evening that he turned his steps towards the villa. Giulietta, Dolores' old Italian servant, had telephoned him earlier in the day that the *signora* was lying down with a bad headache, but that she would expect him to dinner as usual. Accordingly, at eight o'clock he made his way very slowly up the flowered drive to the door of the villa. Contrary to custom, it stood open. Fragments of paper, an oddment or two of string, and a few scraps of straw littered the doorstep untidily. An atmosphere of silence pervaded the place. No sound of steps or voices came to his ears—none of the accustomed murmurous little noises that signify life—and when he rang the bell it seemed to vibrate emptily through the house, jarring the curious stillness with its clangour. No one answered the summons and, after a momentary hesitation, Peter crossed the threshold and entered the silent house.

He passed through the paved hall, through the room where the fountain played, and into a smaller room beyond where they had dined together the previous evening. Each was empty. Nor were there any of the wonted signs of habitation. The laughing Cupid no longer tossed a quivering spray of water into the green-veined basin. Peter missed the cool, tinkling plash of it. Neither books nor papers, nor any of the soft silks and embroideries which had characteristically strewed the room, were to be seen. An air of neatness prevailed, as though the inhabitants of the house had gone away, leaving everything in order for the next tenant.

"Dolores! Giulietta!" Instinctively Peter called aloud, but there came no reply. His voice seemed flung back at him jeeringly by the dumb walls.

He strode hastily out on to the veranda—the veranda where last night he had sat with Dolores in the moonlight. It was unswept, her wicker *chaise-longue* bare of cushions. A shower of fast withering rose-leaves lay across the tessellated floor, blown in by the breeze. Peter's questioning glance came to rest at last on the table where lay a square white envelope, addressed to him in Dolores' careless handwriting.

A muttered curse escaped him. So she had fooled him after all! From the first she had had no intention of keeping the proposed bargain with him. She had been merely amusing herself at his expense. And now she had left the villa, and probably Toby alone knew whither she had gone. That the boy would follow her—might even now have gone to her, while he was wasting precious moments here!—he felt sure. With a hand that shook a little, he tore open the letter, dreading to read the confirmation of his fear.

Peter (the letter ran)—*When you get this I shall have gone away—left Naples. Tell Toby I was everything he didn't believe me to be. That will cure him, my friend. It will hurt him a little at first, but he is young and he*

will forget. It's when one grows older that forgetting is so difficult.

It was good of you to offer yourself as a substitute, Peter—rather brave and splendid of you, all things considered. But I can't take what you offer—because you happen to be the one man in the world I've ever loved or ever shall love. I kept you near me these last two days, though I could see you hated it. But, now that you know everything, I don't think you'll grudge them to me. They are the only good things life has ever given me.

DOLORES.

Alone on the veranda, with the warm night scents around him, and the light of the pale young moon threading the falling dusk, Peter bared his head in grave salutation.

"Rather brave and splendid of you, Dolores—all things considered," he said. His voice was queerly uneven.

CHAPTER VII

GRIST TO THE MILL

"'THE UNDERDOG'? It will be rather a new departure for you, Rorke—a tale that deals with the rank and file."

The head of the famous publishing house of Blake and Milward spoke slowly, consideringly, scanning the thin, hatchet face of the man sitting opposite him—David Rorke, the equally famous novelist.

The latter nodded.

"I know," was all he said. But his grey, deep-set eyes were suddenly luminous. "That's why I want to try it."

Blake hesitated. In the five or six novels which lay to his credit, Rorke had dealt brilliantly with the upper stratum of society, handling it with the sure touch of one who is familiar with every piece and move in the game. He had written of the life which he knew, to which he had been born and bred, and he had struck fire from the conventional, seeking—and finding—the unquenchable human soul hidden beneath the shroud of artificiality. Would he succeed equally with a tale set in a quite other *milieu?* Or would he merely jeopardise a reputation that was worth a comfortable annual income to himself and to his publishers?

On the other hand, if Rorke could bring the same insight to bear on this, to him, untried material, what a crowning success, both artistically and financially, the book might be! Perhaps it was worth risking the experiment.

Blake's expression concentrated into a sudden keenness.

"Try it, then," he said at last. "But—don't write it from those rooms of yours in St. James' Street! Get at grips with the real thing. The underdog will never let you see him

as he is, unless he thinks you're of his own kind. You'll have to live amongst 'em, be one of them. No rich man will ever break through the outworks of their pride, poor devils!"

Again Rorke nodded.

"I've thought of that. David—Seton"—he smiled—"would take a room in one of those big tenement buildings."

"That's the idea!" Blake beamed approval. "And frankly, my dear fellow, it won't hurt you. That last book of yours—well, it was sheer technique and your name on the cover which pulled it off as a success. Your work's getting a bit anæmic; there's not enough red blood in it."

So David went away in search of red blood.

London—that section of it to which the comings and goings of the popular writer mattered in their intimately social aspect—absorbed the information that Rorke had gone out of town to work at his forthcoming novel, and a new tenant took possession of a room in one of those great, rabbit-warren hostelries where the poor and unsuccessful eke out their livelihood.

David had purchased some second-hand furniture which he regarded as appropriate to his new station in life, and the man in charge of the delivery van had deposited it with a lack of ceremony consonant with its cost, leaving David to wrestle single-handed with the question of its ultimate disposition.

It was late in the afternoon by the time he had arranged the greater part of it to his liking and proceeded to focus his attention upon a chest of drawers which still blocked the doorway.

With the half-idle curiosity incidental to new ownership, he had pulled open one of the drawers, only to find that no persuasions of his would induce it to close again. There it remained, with the inherent perversity of all cheap-made furniture, wedged as firmly as a rock. Apparently, therefore, the chest was destined to spend the night on the landing, since, in its present condition, it could by no means be

insinuated through the narrow framework of the doorway.

David made a determined onslaught upon the protruding drawer. To all intents and purposes, he might equally as well have endeavoured to shift a cathedral, and he desisted, reflecting ruefully upon the beautiful old tallboy in his St. James' Street bedroom, with its smoothly running drawers, the skilful handiwork of craftsmen who had lived and died long before the era of cheap goods. Never, hitherto, had he realised how poverty, even the comparative poverty which can afford a room and three—also comparative—meals a day, thrusts its detailed irritations into every nook and cranny of its victim's daily life.

He was still eyeing the open drawer with baffled fury when a light footstep sounded on the stone stairway, and a girl emerged from the gloomy depths below, surmounting the steepness of the steps with an ease that bespoke long practice.

Finding herself confronted by a solid piece of furniture, she paused irresolutely and glanced inquiringly towards the man beside it—a tall, loosely-knit figure in his shabby suit, with boyishly ruffled hair freely adorned with wisps of straw, and, beneath a penthouse of shaggy brow, a pair of kind, discerning grey eyes.

"I'm awfully sorry," said David, replying to her unspoken question, "but I can't get the brute into my room—the confounded drawer has stuck. Can you squeeze by, do you think?"—anxiously gauging the width of the available passage.

A little trill of laughter answered him, spontaneously sweet and gay with delicate mockery.

"Oh, yes, I can get by, I think."

The sparkle of irony in her tones brought David's eyes swiftly from the consideration of the margin of space to the consideration of the girl herself.

The light from the unscreened gas-jet in his room flared out through the open doorway, revealing the extreme slight-

ness of her figure—knowledge of which had flecked her voice with amusement. It disclosed, too, a small fine head, poised on the slender throat with the grace of a harebell, and the pure outline of a face of uncommon charm, lit by dusky, sombre eyes that gleamed like stars reflected in a pool at night.

Against the sordid background of the bald stone stairway and dirt-spotted walls of the tenement building, the girl's face glowed with the vivid beauty of a flower that has sprung into life on a dustheap.

David experienced an impulse of sheer joy in the young loveliness of her, and then, a second later, he was conscious of a bleak perception of the paint which tinged her cheeks and reddened the curving lips that smiled at him. He divined, too, a dexterous technique in the way she wore her clothes, threadbare and shabby though they were, and there was conscious skill in the rakish tilt of her hat.

"Seven stone and a bit," he commented. "Yes, I think you can get by."

She laughed and slipped like a shadow between the corner of the chest of drawers and the projecting angle of the iron banister rail, then paused hesitatingly.

"But can't I help?"

David shook his head.

"The drawer won't budge. I don't believe Samson himself would be of any assistance!"

"Let me try."

She slid a pair of slim, supple hands coaxingly beneath the drawer, and, an instant later, it glided into its appointed place as smoothly as even Mr. Chippendale himself could have desired.

"Brute force isn't everything, you see," she observed demurely.

"As Samson ultimately discovered," he agreed, adding with sincerity: "I am truly grateful for the advent of Delilah."

The girl stood and watched him as he at last pushed and dragged the chest of drawers triumphantly into his room.

"You're just moving in?" She hazarded a quick, bird-like glance at the tell-tale débris that bestrewed the floor.

"I am," he replied grimly. "It's proved a bigger undertaking than I anticipated."

Her eyes rested commiseratingly on his dust-streaked face, noting the signs of physical fatigue it showed.

"Have you fed?" she asked bluntly.

"Haven't had time," he returned, all at once aware that he had had nothing to eat since breakfast and that he was both hungry and thirsty.

"My room is just opposite," she went on, a thought shyly. "If you will come across—in ten minutes' time—I'll give you some tea."

"Oh, but I can't impose——" he began hastily.

"I'm making some for myself, anyway. You'd better come. Why, I dare say you haven't even provided yourself with a kettle?"—searchingly.

He had not. Humbly he acknowledged it.

"I thought as much," she rejoined. "In ten minutes, then." She nodded and disappeared into a room which faced his own from the opposite side of the landing.

A quarter of an hour later he presented himself at her door and was admitted, to the pleasant humming *motif* emitted by a kettle on the gas-ring.

The girl had taken off her outdoor things, and, as she turned towards him, he saw that she had also removed the colouring from her lips and cheeks. Her face now presented a fine, clear pallor, and, in his eyes, she appeared infinitely more attractive than before. The artificial note had jarred on him.

"No, I don't like it any more than you do," she flung at him, reading his thoughts. "It's part of my job, that's all."

"Part of your job?" For a moment a great fear shook him.

The kettle suddenly switched off, substituting clouds of steam for its cheery humming, and the girl busied herself brewing the tea before she made reply.

"I'm a *mannequin,*" she volunteered then, as she handed him his cup. "At the Maison Mariette," she added.

David's sister bought her frocks from Mariette. He was conscious of a feeling of personal guilt, which he recognised as manifestly absurd, seeing that whether his sister dealt at the Maison Mariette or not, this girl would still be compelled to make up suitably in her capacity of *mannequin.*

"That means you show off the latest creations in frocks, doesn't it?" he inquired.

"Yes. And Madame Mariette has no use for girls who look pale and tired—as we most of us do towards the end of the day." Then, as though ridiculing the touch of appeal that had dwelt in the speech: "Imagine showing off a pale blue gown with one's face the colour of paper! There would be no sale if your customer thought the frock might emphasise her own putty-coloured complexion!"

"It sounds a bit exacting," commented David. "What made you take up the—the profession of *mannequin?*"

"Lack of money and the absence of other means to make any. My face—or rather"—with a light laugh—"my figure's my fortune! And there aren't too many—respectable—occupations open to a woman whose capital is vested in her looks," she added dryly.

"Then if you lose your figure——"

"I lose my job. But"—smiling briefly—"that's an unlikely contingency. The occupants of a tenement building don't over-eat—much."

Presently she sought a reciprocal confidence.

"But you—what are you doing in a place like this? You've not"—shrewdly—"always been—one of us?"

"No," he answered truthfully. "Not always."

She nodded.

"I thought not. You'll find it all the harder. I don't suppose you've the remotest idea how to live cheaply?"

"No, I don't think I have," he admitted. "But I shall have to learn," he added decisively.

"You must let me help you"—eagerly. "I'll show you where to shop—in the evenings, you know, that's the cheapest time."

"I shall be very glad if you will."

"All right. I'll be glad to do it. They're sharks, half of them—the salesmen, I mean, and they'd size you up in two minutes—and charge you accordingly."

Later, alone once more in his own room, David found himself musing on the simple method of making friends which apparently obtained in his new sphere of life. No observance of a formal ritual was required—just the mere need that one human being may have of another's help, and the preliminaries of acquaintance were swamped in an eager offer of service.

Sheila Craig—she had told him her name, and the lilt of it lingered pleasingly in his ears—gave good measure. In the weeks that followed she showed him where to buy his provisions to the best advantage, advised him as to which milkman added the least quantum of water to a pint of milk, and initiated him into all the little shifts and economies by which sixpence may be made to go as far as a shilling in less skilful hands.

A happy comradeship founded itself on these experiences, and gradually, prompted by her eager interest, he enlightened her as to his work.

"I'm a quill-driver," he told her, in answer to her friendly questioning.

She shook her head dubiously.

"Sounds well enough—but the pay's very irregular."

"Yes," he agreed, "the pay's irregular. But if one succeeds——"

"It may be all right at the top of the tree, but seven-and-six a thousand, or thereabouts, isn't good enough. I had a pal who wrote. She types other people's work now"—grimly. "It pays her better."

A remote little smile played about his mouth. He felt blackly hypocritical, but to admit the truth was to stultify his purpose. She must still believe him a struggler in the sea of competition, like herself.

"I am trying," he told her gravely, "to write a book about the lives of unsuccessful folk—the poor devils of underdogs who've never had a fighting chance in life."

"About us—people like you and me?" she asked quickly, her eyes kindling.

"Yes—about people like you and me," he assented.

"Oh! How splendid of you!" Her face glowed. "We want some one to write about us—to tell the world how hard hit we are. We're not poor enough for charity—and we don't want it, either!"—fiercely. "And we've no trade union to strengthen our hands. We're just fighting—fighting to keep our self-respect, and our bodies and souls together—and it's one eternal grind, with no chance of ever getting our heads above water. Oh, David! Write it—write it quickly!" She paused. "How I wish you were a popular author—some one well known, so that everybody would read your book!" He winced, and she went on swiftly. "But, after all, if you were, you wouldn't know how to write about us, would you?"—smiling whimsically.

"No, I shouldn't know."

"You must let me help," she pursued eagerly. "There are people in this very building whose lives ought to go into that book. They're all friends of mine," she added simply. "I'll introduce you to them—you must make friends with them, too."

So, under Sheila's auspices, David made friends with the middle-aged clerk at a hundred and sixty a year (and no prospect of a rise), who had an invalid wife and daughter to

support, and with the little music-mistress who occupied a tiny attic up in the roof, and whose old-fashioned methods had left her high and dry as the tide of modern technique swept by her, and with the fifty shillings a week chorus-girl, who had come up from the country to make her fortune, and whose fiercely primitive virtue had cost her her job and resulted in an enforced period of "resting" which promised to lengthen out indefinitely.

They were all intrinsically new to David, these types of the underdog. Vaguely he had been aware of their existence, but now, for the first time, he came up against the raw reality of their struggle to make ends meet and preserve appearances.

He began his book, writing, like one possessed, all day and often far into the night, only keeping his evenings free, when, in company with Sheila, he probed ever more deeply into the heart of things, learning much, even from the simple exposition of her own life. There would be red blood enough in the new book when it should appear!

As autumn deepened into winter, the question of gas and fuel became of absorbing interest, and he and Sheila made common cause against the encroaching darkness and the bitter cold by adopting a communal plan of sharing each other's light and fire on alternate evenings, thus reducing their individual expenditure to a minimum.

It was during these long evenings, passed together in the happy intimacy of comradeship, that David gradually drew from the girl the common tragedy of her life. She had been the daughter of a country parson, dependent on the microscopic value of his living, and, in consequence, at his death, she had been flung entirely on her own resources.

"I was fifteen then," she told him. "I'm twenty now. I've beaten the world for five years—single-handed. Some day—when I grow old—it will beat me, I suppose. 'A' woman whose looks are all her stock-in-trade is bound to be beaten in the long run."

The simple, unself-conscious cynicism of her outlook thrust at David like a sharp-edged sword. There was no questioning its sincerity. It was the uttermost lesson she had learned from life—the very antithesis of that garbled shibboleth of cynicism prattled out by the sheltered, superficial women of his own world.

For five years—since she was hardly more than a child—she had been up against the naked realities of life, and David was conscious of a sudden overwhelming fury that such things should be. He wanted to take her right away from it all, to keep her safe, to stand between her and the world, now and always.

"Sheila"—his voice shook a little—"you need never fight the world—single-handed—again. Marry me, and let us fight it together."

"But—but—why?" She kept him away with a little imperative gesture when he would have approached her, her eyes, wide and startled, searching his face. All at once, they flashed into anger, and she darted from him, standing apart like a wild thing at bay.

"Oh, I know! You're sorry for me! You're asking me to marry you out of pity——"

In a couple of strides he gained her side.

"I'm not! I love you! I've been loving you for months, but I've only just found it out. I didn't know it before. I didn't know why these evenings together were so splendid; I didn't know why every minute away from you seemed wasted. But I know now. I love you!"

She was silent for so long that he had time to realise what it would mean to him if she sent him away from her. Unconsciously, but none the less compellingly, love had been growing and deepening within him, until now, in this moment of avowal, he recognised that it had submerged his whole being. Without Sheila's love, life henceforth would be a thing of no worth.

"Sheila—answer me!" His voice shook uncontrollably. "Have you no love—nothing—to give me?"

She went to him then, swiftly, unreservedly.

"Oh, my dear—*yes!* I've everything to give you. Why—why, David"—as his arms closed round her—"didn't you guess? That very first day—on the stairs—you looked so lost, such a great big helpless baby of a man, struggling with that chest of drawers and with your hair all on end—I think I loved you then!"

"When shall we get married?" he asked presently. "To-morrow? Next day?"

She ridiculed him gently.

"We can't get married on our present mutual income," she said, smiling.

"No, I suppose not. I forgot!"

He frowned, biting his lip. He was not yet ready to avow the truth concerning his position—not until the book was finished. In a few weeks now, at the outside, his work would be done, and then he could leave this tragic house of the underdog, and take Sheila away with him and show her how lovely a thing life may be made. Till then——

It was she herself who found a way out of the dilemma.

"We must wait, dear," she said, "wait till the book is published. And then, if it goes well, perhaps"—shyly—"perhaps we might get married."

"Yes, that's it," he said, relieved. "When the book is published, then we'll get married. It won't be very long now, sweetheart."

* * * * * * *

Sheila stooped and applied a match to David's unlit fire. He would be home before very long, she hoped, and meanwhile she would get the room warm and presently put the kettle on to boil in readiness for their supper.

It was a Saturday afternoon, so her time was her own, and she took a feminine delight in making her small prepara-

tions for his coming. It was like a foretaste of that life together which would be theirs when David's ship came home.

She tended the newly-lit fire until it gave forth a cheery blaze and busied herself straightening out the typical bachelor confusion of the room. Then, from a cupboard in the wall, she took out the requisite crockery for the coming meal and set the table.

After that, there remained nothing further she could do before he came, and, espying a big bundle of manuscript on the desk at which he worked, she crossed the room and began idly turning the pages, reading a few lines here and there.

It was his new book, "The Underdog," as he had named it, and only that same morning he had told her, with a gay ring of triumph in his voice, that he had completed it.

As she turned the pages of closely written script, a thin sheet of notepaper slipped from between them and, drifting downward to the floor, lay there face upward. She stooped to recover it, and, almost before she was aware, her eyes had involuntarily gathered something of the sense of what was written on it—something so significant that, with a cry, she snatched it up, staring at it with horrified, incredulous eyes.

The printed heading at the top of the sheet was that of Blake and Milward, Publishers. Sheila's glance raced down the few, brief written lines that followed.

Dear Rorke—the letter ran—*Surely you must have sojourned among the aborigines long enough to have absorbed their atmosphere? Their loves and hates, pains and penalties of existence, ought to be at your fingers' ends by this time! I didn't mean to banish you from polite society indefinitely!*

How goes The Underdog? *I'll wager it's the real thing, and the local colour unimpeachable.*

Yours ever,

Jonathan Blake.

The letter fluttered from Sheila's nerveless fingers, and she sat staring at the blank wall opposite, her face set in a white mask of horror.

David Seton—the man she had thought just such another struggler in deep waters as herself—was David Rorke, the foremost novelist of the day!

The irony of the thing! He was rich—rich, and she, thinking him no better dowered than herself, had been teaching him how to live as the poor must needs live, had unveiled before him all the little sordid makeshifts enjoined upon them by an iron compulsion. How he must have laughed!

The significance of the letter was quite clear to her—as clear as though she had been present at the interview between David and his publisher and had heard Blake's counsel: "Go down and live amongst them—be one of them."

That, then, was why David Rorke had come to dwell in a tenement building—in order to collect material for the new book he was writing!

And she herself, and the chorus-girl, and the wan old music-teacher whose day was past—all those whose drab little tragedies she had exposed to him had been only so many "types" for the skilled delineation of his pen.

Even their love—hers and his—that, too, had been tossed into the melting-pot! *"Their loves and hates must be at your fingers' ends . . ."* Blake had written.

Quite collectedly, with a curious deliberation of movement, she turned to the bulky manuscript, lying on the desk in front of her, and began to read, skipping passages here and there, but gathering the sense of the story as she went along. Yes, it was all there—all that he had gleaned in the months he had passed amid the lame dogs of life—posing as one of them, pretending that he shared their handicap.

An hour—two hours—passed away before she rose, shivering, from her seat, and, more from force of habit than anything else, coaxed the smouldering fire into fresh life against David's coming.

It struck her crudely that this was the last little service she would ever render him. Henceforth their ways would lie apart. She must go—go before he returned. It was a fortunate circumstance that he chanced to be so late this evening.

She glanced curiously round the room, as though taking farewell of its dear familiarity. Her hand was outstretched towards the door.

And then came the sound of eager, hurrying steps on the stairs outside . . . David's step . . .

. . . . . .

The bitter passion of her accusation rushed from her lips, and, when she ceased to speak, a silence that was still more bitter filled the room.

At last David answered her—collectedly, almost carefully, it seemed. Yet the dumb hurt in his eyes made her flinch and catch her breath.

"I suppose it does appear like that to you," he said meditatively. "As though I'd just come to spy out the land."

The slow, considering tones rasped her raw-edged nerves, and she retaliated furiously.

"Yes, it does appear like that. And now that you've sucked the orange dry, now that you know how the underdog lives—how he eats and drinks, and laughs and weeps, you can go! Go! Go back to your own world! . . . Our loves, too—and our *hates*"—she laughed shrilly—"those must be at your fingers' ends!"

His face twisted.

"Sheila, listen to me! Give me a chance to explain! You misunderstand——"

She controlled herself with an effort.

"No, David, it isn't that," she said quietly. "It's that I understand too well! We were all of us only grist to the mill—just so much material for you to work upon and turn into money."

"I swear it isn't so! I acknowledge that originally I came for that——"

"So you admit it—now that you're found out!"—scornfully.

"Yes," he answered steadily. "I admit it. I did come for that—and then I stayed because, whether it made money or no, the book had to be written. It *needed* to be written, and thank God I was able to write it!"

But her faith was too shaken for her to grasp the purport of his speech, its earnest significance.

"*I'm* there—in your book!" she arraigned him with increasing bitterness.

"Yes"—very simply. "How could it be otherwise? You're in my heart—in my life."

"In your purse, you mean!"—contemptuously. "You only pretended to be one of us—you've made a mockery of us, analysing us and our ways and our emotions to please your public. That book"—pointing to it—"will stand between you and me for ever. Oh! Can't you understand? I'm there, we're all there—put there so that you may earn money and fame. There's nothing—nothing sacred to a man who writes!"

"There is. Love—is sacred. Won't you try"—there was a deep appeal in his voice—"won't you try to believe it, Sheila?"

"Believe it? No, I can't. It's all been part of the play. But I've finished. Henceforth, our lives are separate. I'll get down from the dissecting table!"

She turned to go, but he placed himself determinedly in front of her.

"By God! You *shall* understand—you *shall* believe I care!"

"I can't," came in dull, remorseless repetition.

"You think I value that book, place it first and love second? There's good stuff in it, I know——"

"I'm sure of it," she broke in harshly. "You've put our souls and bodies into it!"

"I do value it," he continued readily. "I've worked at it day in, day out, for months. I've not been just an onlooker, as you choose to believe. The life has gripped me, caught me up, and I've been one of your fellows—no more, and no less. And for that reason the best work I shall ever do is in that book—work that will live—because *I've* lived and felt and suffered it. . . . But I love you more than the work of my brain, more than fame, more than anything on earth, and if the book stands between us, it shall go!"

With a swift movement he seized the pile of manuscript from the desk and hurled it on to the fire.

"There!" he cried. "There's my proof of love! *Now* will you marry me?"

In silence the man and woman stood staring at the heaped-up script which filled the grate, and, stunned into a curious passivity, Sheila watched the fire die suddenly down beneath the impact of its heavy bulk.

A minute later, like a snake, a narrow tongue of flame darted up, licked the leaves, and vanished, leaving a streak of brown across the whiteness of the covering sheet, while the undermost pages slowly turned a deepening yellow, cockling a little at the edges.

Still Sheila stood motionless, waiting, watching, in a dream-like apathy. She felt powerless to move—as though her limbs were bound with cords.

Then, with a whispering hiss, a second ribbon of flame shot upward, rimming the edges of some loosened sheets with a quivering frill of fire—and this time the flame burned on, flickering greedily.

In the same instant something seemed to snap in Sheila's brain. With a stifled scream she sprang forward, and a second later she was on her knees before the hearth, dragging the manuscript from the fire, beating out the flames with her little bare fists.

"It shan't burn—it shan't burn!" she whimpered sobbingly.

With his arms about her, David lifted her to her feet. She was still clutching the scarred manuscript, crushing out against her breast a last lingering spark that clung to it, widening into a glowing circle of red.

"David—David!" Her lips were shaking. "It was like watching murder done! . . . I couldn't bear it!" Impetuously she thrust the bundle of manuscript into his hands. "But I've saved it—saved your book."

He smiled at her.

"Better murder a book, dear heart, than our love."

For a moment she was silent before the stark immensity of the sacrifice he had been prepared to make. Then:

"And you—you've saved our love, David," she said, and there was a soft, deep shining in her eyes. "It won't—it can't ever die, now."

CHAPTER VIII

THE STRAIGHT GAME

1

MRS. DAVENTRY laid the soft, fluffy powder-puff she had just been using down on the glass-topped toilet-table and, picking up her lipstick, carefully touched her lips, delicately emphasising their charming contour. Then she tilted the mirror and attentively regarded the result of her labours.

Applied art undoubtedly contributed towards her appearance, although not to any extravagant extent, and it was a distinctly attractive face that looked back at her from the glass—piquantly angled, with a straight little nose and those rather high cheek-bones which somehow seem to enhance the value of the eyes above them. The eyes in question were long and hazel, with tiny specks of black and gold in the iris and, at their outer corners, a faint, artistically drawn line of shadow served to complete anything which Nature might have left to chance in their setting of brow and cheek-bone. Beneath the smart little *cloche* hat, with its single inimitable touch of vivid tangerine, gleamed burnished hair that unmistakably owed a part of its coppery sheen to a judicious application of henna.

Its owner sighed discontentedly.

"And it's all a sheer waste here!" she remarked in heartfelt tones.

Certainly the little Italian lakeside village of Varesina seemed a most inappropriate *mise-en-scène* for a woman of the type of Cara Daventry. A scattered handful of villas perched above the borders of the mountain-girdled lake,

meandering village streets, primitive and pavementless, but boasting a few desirable shops where cobwebby lace, leather work, and exquisite trifles in frail tortoiseshell were enticingly displayed to tempt the tourist, and one really good hotel—these comprised the whole of Varesina's attractions. At least, from Mrs. Daventry's essentially material standpoint. The tranquil beauty of the place with its grave, snow-capped mountains, its placid stretch of blue water, broken here and there by tree-crowned islands or by a splash of colour as a boat with gaily-coloured awning drifted by, appealed to her not at all. As she had written to a friend in London: "You can't live exclusively on a beautiful view—at any rate, I can't."

She had happened on the place by accident. An acquaintance who had spent several weeks there in company with a party of friends had painted a glowing picture for her of the manifold delights of Varesina, quite unconsciously discounting the fact that it was the society of kindred spirits equally as much as the picturesque environment which had contributed to her enjoyment, and Mrs. Daventry, alone in an hotel that was now half empty, had been utterly and irretrievably bored since the very first day of her arrival.

Still, it was of no use sulking in her bedroom when the sun beckoned her outside, and, selecting by sheer force of habit a sunshade that toned artistically with her frock, she made her way downstairs and strolled through the deserted gardens until she came to the edge of the lake. Here a small jetty jutted out into the water, edged by a low, stone wall and with a flight of steps leading down from it to the water's level. One or two boats, moored at the foot of the steps, lay almost motionless on the still surface, and she paused, glancing towards them uncertainly. Finally, feeling even too listless to attempt a pull on the lake, she unfurled her sunshade and, subsiding on to the wall, sat staring broodingly across at the snow-topped mountains.

It was wonderfully quiet. Hardly a sound broke the

warm, reposeful silence, and for a long time she remained absorbed in her thoughts. But presently, gradually piercing her consciousness, came an even, rhythmic sound like the pulse of an engine and, looking up, she saw a motor-boat making its way towards the jetty. There was only one figure in the boat, the lean, athletic figure of a man. His build, and the fair, kinky hair which the sunlight turned to gold, stamped him as unmistakably English, and instinctively Mrs. Daventry's half-absent gaze quickened to attention. The boat drew nearer—slowed down. It was almost alongside the jetty. A feeling of desperation took possession of her. It seemed ages since she had spoken to a man—a real, live Englishman. Her arm jerked spasmodically, and the next moment her sunshade flew out of her grasp and alighted on the surface of the water, where it bobbed up and down like a big, gaily-painted mushroom.

The man in the motor-boat swerved its bows in the sunshade's direction.

"All right," he called. "I'll get it."

Five minutes later he was standing, parasol in hand, at Mrs. Daventry's side.

"It's dripping wet. You'd better let me carry it back to the hotel for you," he said. "You *are* staying there, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm staying there," she answered. "How did you guess?"

"Well, for one thing I saw you coming across the gardens about half an hour ago. And, in any case, there's nowhere else where any one—like you—could possibly be staying."

He smiled, and Cara thought his smile was the most delightful thing she had ever seen. It began in his eyes, those very blue eyes of his, and ended crookedly at his mouth, slanting it up whimsically a little to one side. He was about thirty, she supposed, and devoutly hoped he was unattached.

"How ripping for me!" he exclaimed boyishly as they strolled towards the hotel together. "I only arrived here

this morning, and now, thanks to your sunshade"—he shook it lightly and the drops of water flew from it in a crystal spray—"we shan't need to glare at each other for several days before we dare to make acquaintance."

"It's ripping for me, too," she returned.

"Oh, I expect you've made heaps of friends here already," he said discontentedly.

She laughed outright.

"I should be very clever if I had! The hotel is half empty, and such visitors as there are seem to be mostly American tourists who rush out sight-seeing all day and play bridge all evening, a few Milanese whose principal occupation is fishing in the lake, and one or two English—of the sort who would never make friends without a proper introduction! There goes one of them," she added, nodding rather slightingly in the direction of a tall, angular woman with iron-grey hair and a remarkably high-bridged nose who was also heading for the hotel, accompanied by a slip of a girl of seventeen.

"Good Lord!" Mrs. Daventry's companion went off into a shout of laughter. "That's my respected aunt, Lady Erskine, with her daughter. I'd no notion they were staying here."

"Oh, I'm sorry——" Cara flushed uncomfortably.

"You needn't be—one little bit," he assured her cheerfully. "We dislike each other as cordially as most relatives. And she's exactly what you've described her—about as friendly as Cleopatra's Needle."

In the lounge he left her and went off dutifully to pay his respects to his aunt, who was waiting regally to greet him before she entered the lift. Cara, watching him shake hands with mother and daughter, was aware of a fleeting hostile glance levelled at her from under lowered lids by the elder woman and surmised that Lady Erskine must have seen her walking with her nephew in the hotel gardens—seen and disapproved.

"Wants him for that bread-and-butter daughter of hers,"

was Mrs. Daventry's inward comment, and she forthwith mentally proclaimed a state of war. All along she had been conscious of a subdued animosity towards the Erskines, who had somewhat pointedly taken no notice of her since her arrival at the hotel, and now she derived a certain malicious amusement from the fact that her acquaintance with their quite desirable relative obviously afforded them anything but satisfaction.

The man who had rescued her sunshade from a watery grave proved to be even more desirable than she had anticipated. The hotel register declared him to be Sir Roger Heriot of Heriot's Court, and her knowledge of Debrett was amply sufficient to assure her that he was numbered amongst the most eligible bachelors of the moment.

To Cara Daventry this fact was of enormous significance. Life had not hitherto been particularly kind to her. She possessed nothing beyond the tiny income which she had inherited from her father, and for more years now than she cared to remember she had reinforced it in various little ways that did not bear too close inspection—at least, not from the point of view of the sheltered, cared-for woman whose husband always foots the bills. Mrs. Daventry had no husband to undertake this very necessary office for her, and it was said that she was not at all averse from allowing other people's husbands—or sons, as the case might be—to atone for this deficiency. "Such jewellery, too, my dear! She never bought it herself—of that you may be sure." This was the kind of whispered gossip that pursued her, and wherever she went, desperately though she might try to keep in with the right people, some one invariably turned up who had known of her elsewhere, and soon afterwards a certain chilliness in the social atmosphere became apparent and Mrs. Daventry, as an acquaintance, was gently allowed to "slide."

Latterly, things had grown more difficult than ever, and she had even trenched upon her small capital to keep going, and there were occasional moments when sheer terror of the

future caught her by the throat. Marriage held out the only hope of salvation, and, owing to that shrewd instinct of distrust which warned vigilant mothers to shepherd their sons determinedly away from her, the prospect of achieving matrimony grew more remote with each succeeding year.

But now, thanks to that happy inspiration regarding her sunshade, a vista of glorious possibilities—such as she had long believed inexorably closed to her—had suddenly opened at her feet. The frank admiration in Roger Heriot's blue eyes assured her of that, and here, in this lonely, romantic spot on the shores of Lake Maggiore, she felt that for once she had a clear field. She had been quick enough to sense Lady Erskine's silent disapprobation, but she did not think the latter would injure her chances much, seeing that Heriot obviously cared precious little for his august relative's opinion. And, in any case, an aunt was a much less difficult proposition than a mother.

So that Cara plunged into this new campaign with high hopes of success. She and Heriot went out often together on the lake, sometimes in the motor-boat which, as he gaily observed, "effected our first introduction," sometimes in one of the rowing-boats, its cool white awning sheltering them from the blazing sun while Roger pulled leisurely at the oars and Cara lay back against the cushions in the stern, pretending to steer. They played tennis together on the one extremely bad court which was all the hotel boasted, and climbed the mountains, occasionally on foot, but more often by means of the funny little funicular railway which wound its way up their steep sides. And at last, of course, the inevitable happened.

It was one evening when the moon was sailing through the sky like a great golden globe, and Roger had abruptly suggested a turn on the lake by moonlight.

"Will you come?" he asked, a queer note of urgency in his voice. "It was on the lake we first met." And then Cara guessed why he wanted it and she agreed a little breathlessly.

Roger, coming out of the hotel a few minutes later with a rug slung over his arm, encountered Lady Erskine.

"You're going on the lake," she said, glancing at the rug rather as though it were an unpleasant species of caterpillar. "I heard you ask that woman to go with you."

He nodded.

"You heard me ask Mrs. Daventry," he returned pleasantly. "Any objection?"

"Every objection. She's a man-hunter, and you're simply walking straight into the net with your eyes blindly shut. You don't know all about her. If you did——" She paused significantly.

"I know all I wish to, thank you," he returned. "Mrs. Daventry has been quite frank. She's told me she's deadly hard up, and"—his voice softening—"I know she is lonely." He smiled straight into Lady Erskine's hard blue eyes. "And we're going on the lake together."

He wheeled round and marched away, and although his aunt, suddenly realising that matters had gone much further than she had suspected, called to him to come back, he apparently didn't hear her. For a few minutes later she discerned his broad-shouldered figure and Mrs. Daventry's slender one standing side by side on the distant jetty, clearly silhouetted in the moonlight.

2

"And, darling, do you mind how soon we're married?" said Roger joyously. "Now that we've quite settled that we love each other and that we could neither of us possibly marry any one else, I don't see any object in waiting."

The motor-boat had long since ceased to hum and lay idly rocking on the water in the middle of the lake, while two quite ridiculously happy people sat in the stern alternately making love and talking nonsense together.

Marriage! Cara lifted her head from Roger's shoulder and sat up suddenly. Why, that was the thing she had been

aiming at, striving for, all these weeks, and now, now that she had accomplished her object and Heriot had asked her to be his wife, she had forgotten all about that part of it and remembered only that she loved him. The material side of the matter—the fact that the hand-to-mouth existence she had been living was over and done with, that her future was safe, her position assured—had never once entered her thoughts since the moment Roger had told her that he loved her and she had felt herself respond in every fibre of her being. She had been conscious of nothing except the splendour and glory of their mutual love, and even while now she recognised all that marriage with Heriot would mean to her from a worldly standpoint, she felt illimitably thankful that she had had that one glorious moment of simple love, free from all sordid considerations of material values.

"Oh, Roger, I'm so glad—so glad!" she exclaimed impulsively, her voice a little shaken.

"I'm glad, too," he returned, not altogether understanding her, but boyishly exuberant in his new-found joy. "Gladder than I can say, sweetheart."

The boat drifted on almost imperceptibly, and at times they talked together and at times let the tender silence of the night enfold them. When they spoke, it was of the wonderful life that would be theirs after they were married, of Heriot Court, the beautiful old house, dating from the Norman period, which had been the home of the Heriots since the days of William the Conqueror, and insensibly Cara gathered something of the high standards and tradition which Roger, like every Heriot worthy of the name, endeavoured to live up to.

"*'Truth and my sword,'*" said Roger, half shyly translating for her benefit the old Latin motto of the Heriots. "It's rather nice, isn't it, sweetheart? The kind of clean, straightforward motto a man can grip. My grandfather had it carved across the nursery chimneypiece at Heriot, because he said his children couldn't get used to the idea too soon.

And I think he was right. To play the game, and play it straight—that's the main thing."

"'*Truth and my sword,*'" repeated Cara, and a shadow seemed to fall across her heart. Truth—sheer crystalline truth—did it count so much, then, in Roger's eyes? With an effort she thrust the thought aside, and it was almost a relief when he suggested that they should be turning homeward. She agreed hastily and sat idly trailing her fingers in the water while he busied himself restarting the motor. He was rather a long time about it, she thought. Once she heard the familiar hum and felt the boat steal forward a yard or two. Then came an irregular knocking and the little vessel seemed to shiver and stand still. Confused sounds issued from the covered-in vicinity of the engine, whither Roger had disappeared into the darkness—the clink of tools picked up and tossed down again, and once a hearty English "Damn!" was wafted up to her. At length Roger himself emerged, hot and rather grimy, his face adorned with a black and oily smudge which ran from brow to chin.

"It's all up!" he remarked succinctly. "That confounded engine's struck work for the night."

"What!" A look of dismay crossed Cara's face. "You don't mean—that the boat won't go?"

"That's just what I do mean," he replied. "She won't budge a yard."

"Then how shall we get back?"

A whimsical smile tilted Heriot's mouth.

"We shan't get back—unless we find another boat to pick us up. And as there doesn't seem to be a craft of any kind within hail, I'm afraid our chances don't look very rosy."

"Do you mean—we shall have to *stay* here—all night?" gasped Cara.

She had been caught in one or two not altogether dissimilar scrapes before, thanks to her own want of discretion, and her reputation had suffered a little tarnishing in conse-

quence on each occasion. And now, it seemed too hard that, just as she was on the eve of a new and much more desirable kind of existence, this unlooked-for *contretemps* should arise.

"Aren't there any fishing-boats about?" she queried anxiously, her eyes searching the lake for any glimmer of a distant light. "There usually are."

Roger shook his head.

"To-night seems to be an 'off night' with them," he returned gloomily. "Never mind, darlingest. I'll tuck you up in my coat and the rug and you'll be all right till the morning. Luckily, it's warm weather."

"You might shout," suggested Cara. "Some one may hear us from the shore."

"I'm afraid we're too far out. And, anyway, I expect the whole of Varesina is sound asleep by this time."

Not to lose any possible chance of rescue, however, he sent his voice lustily across the water, again and again. But it produced no result. Apparently the inhabitants of Varesina were too deeply wrapped in slumber to be easily aroused. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to make the best of a bad job, and at last, with the rug drawn well up round her and leaning against Roger's shoulder, Cara fell asleep.

3

She woke to the sound of voices. It was already daylight and she found that a small fishing-craft had pulled alongside the motor-boat. Heriot explained that he had seen and hailed the fishermen and that they had agreed to put them ashore and tow the motor-boat back to harbour. Half an hour later as she and Roger, cold and very hungry, made their way up from the jetty, Cara saw one of the hotel windows go up and a dressing-gown clad figure pause for a moment at the aperture to stare down at them.

"My reputation will be quite gone," she declared, with a rather nervous laugh.

Roger laughed too, and squeezed her arm reassuringly.

"That matters to no one except your future husband," he said masterfully. "And I'm satisfied."

She was conscious of a sudden thrill. It was as though, in those few words, Roger had epitomised the whole altered relationship in which she stood towards the world at large. No longer Mrs. Daventry of nowhere in particular, a woman whom the safely established members of her own sex regarded with a species of distrust, but the future wife of Heriot of Heriot's Court, with the strong wall of a secure position fencing her round from adverse comment and innuendo. Henceforth *she* was to be one of the sheltered women. It was almost unbelievable, and when she reached the seclusion of her own room she went down on her knees in a passion of gratitude and thanksgiving.

But she had forgotten the dressing-gowned figure at the window. Lady Erskine, watching with scandalised eyes the return of her nephew and Mrs. Daventry in the cold grey light of the early morning, summed up the whole situation in two angry syllables:

"The minx!"

And immediately after breakfast she made a praiseworthy effort to save Heriot from his folly. She listened to his explanation of the night's events with a cynically superior smile.

"Very clever of her indeed," she commented, "to think of tampering with the engine. I suppose she told you you had ruined her reputation?"

Roger's eyes twinkled.

"She did mention the word 'reputation,'" he admitted.

"She would! And of course you think you've got to marry her now?"

"I *am* going to marry her," he returned quietly.

Lady Erskine's eyes narrowed. There was something in Roger's quiet speech which convinced her.

"You can't," she said swiftly. "You can't marry that woman, Roger."

His face set itself in suddenly stern lines.

"Aunt Marian, I can't allow you to adopt that tone regarding my future wife."

"But that's just it. You musn't *make* her your wife." For once genuine feeling sounded in Lady Erskine's voice. "You can't—you can't put a woman of that sort in your mother's place."

"What do you mean?" She had got through his guard at last with that reference to his sainted, adored mother—the woman who had reigned as a very great lady at Heriot's Court until the day of her death. "What do you mean? You've said either too much or too little. You must explain, please."

"There's very little explanation required. Whatever else she is, that woman is not Mrs. Daventry."

"It's a lie!"

Lady Erskine's thin lips curled.

"Is it?" she said coldly. "Then ask her. Ask her—and find out for yourself."

"I will," he answered. And, wheeling round, he went impulsively in search of Cara.

He found her in a sun-bathed corner of the garden, and as she greeted him with a happy little smile, he hated his errand. But he had no thought of evading it.

"Belovedest," he said, standing squarely in front of her, "I've got something perfectly beastly to ask you."

The gravity in his voice sent her heart racing. In an instant she felt that something threatened.

"What—what is it?" she faltered.

"It's nothing, really. Oh, darling, don't look like that—there's no need. It's this: Are you, or are you not, Mrs. Daventry? I know it sounds ridiculous, and I feel a perfect fool asking you such a question. But something's been said

—something utterly idiotic—and so I just want you to tell me that you *are* Mrs. Daventry."

In the pause that followed Cara's mind worked with lightning-like rapidity. She had faced bad moments before, but never anything quite so bad as this. Her head drooped a little.

"Suppose—suppose I told you I was *not* Mrs. Daventry?" she said slowly.

"But you are—you must be!" Roger made a quick step forward, and for the first time fear crept into his eyes. "Cara, what do you mean?"

Suddenly she lifted her head and smiled straight at him. She had come to a decision.

"I don't mean anything very dreadful," she said lightly. "It's only that I'm not married—really. I'm *Miss* Daventry. But as I was travelling alone, I called myself Mrs., because it made things so much easier. A girl travelling alone, you know—Oh, don't you understand, Roger? You must."

A great sigh of relief burst from him.

"Yes, of course I understand, darling. But it was a pity you did it. It wasn't a bit necessary, really, and you see how it might give rise to misunderstandings."

"Yes, I see," she answered seriously. "I never thought of it that way. You're—you're not angry, Roger?"

"No, of course not. But I wish you hadn't done it."

"I wish it, too—now, since it displeases you."

"Never mind." He laughed and kissed her. "It's only—don't you see?—*'Truth and my sword.'* Even in little things it's worth sticking to. Now let's go out and climb mountains, shall we?"

They did not return from their expedition until the evening, and then it was to learn that Lady Erskine had received a wire recalling her to England, and that she and her daughter and maid had hastily packed up their belongings and left Varesina by the afternoon train. So that Roger would be perforce compelled to deny himself until their next

meeting the very human satisfaction of proving to his aunt how absurdly she had been making a mountain out of a molehill.

"It's quite a good notion—that of going back to England," he remarked reflectively, when he heard the news of the Erskines' departure.

"Why, haven't you liked it here?" queried Cara. A sudden fear of leaving Varesina swept across her. It was so tranquil, so perfect, here on the shores of the lake—just she and Roger alone together. The thought of returning to England filled her with a queer sort of alarm.

"I've loved it," returned Heriot. "Every minute of it. But I shall love everything in the world better when you're my wife. So let's go back to England and get married, sweetest. Shall we?"

4

Cara leaned back in her corner of the railway carriage and stared absently out of the window at the fields and hedges as they flew past. It was only a week now to the day fixed for her wedding, and she was on her way to Roger's home. He had begged her to run down from London for a day so that they could discuss certain new decorations he was planning to have put in hand whilst they were absent on their honeymoon.

He met her at the station, and waiting outside was the Rolls-Royce limousine, an immaculate footman in livery standing at the door. Soon they were slipping smoothly along the country road, and presently passed a lodge and swept up the long avenue of elms which led to Heriot's Court. A woman curtsied respectfully at the lodge gates as she swung them apart, and when the doors of the stately old house were opened by the butler to admit them, Cara received a fleeting impression of other menservants waiting in the background.

She gave a little inward gasp as the realisation broke upon her that all these things—the stately park with its beautiful old house, cars, servants, all this environment of ease and luxury—would henceforth be part and parcel of her own life. The contrasting recollection of the past with its pinchings and scrapings and wretched little makeshifts filled her with a wild desire to laugh.

After lunch, Roger showed her over the place—room after room, each with its note of character, its bit of history. The hall, where ancient suits of armour glinted from dusky corners, and where hung the tattered banners of past days, stained with the blood of Heriots who had died for king and country. Gardens—a riot of gorgeous colour—the Italian garden, the Dutch garden, the rosery, each of which had been the special pride and care of one or other bygone generation. And over all that inalienable atmosphere of tradition, of things old and valued and very precious, the suggestion of some hidden spiritual standard to which life in all its aspects was definitely attuned. Cara was vibrantly conscious of it, and it made her feel somehow small and paltry and cheap.

"It's very beautiful—your home, Roger," she said at last.

"Yes," he answered quietly. "I love every stick and stone of it, and all the memories that to me are an integral part of it. I'm not in the least a snob, but there's something in having a long line of brave men and splendid women at your back. It *means* something. It puts a certain compulsion on you to live up to what they have been—a duty to a name that has always stood for faith and honour and the things that count."

A name that has always stood for faith and honour! Cara's hand went swiftly up to her throat and she glanced at him with suddenly frightened eyes.

"Does it mean—so much to you?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes," he said simply. "It means everything. It's like a torch that is handed on from one generation to another, and now it's come to my turn. It's up to me to hand that

torch on, just as I received it, to my children and to their children after them."

Almost as though she were in a dream she accompanied him to the picture gallery where hung the portraits of dead and gone Heriots. They seemed to look down at her with grave, questioning eyes as though they asked: "Are you worthy to become one of us—to hand on the torch?"

They paused longest beneath the portrait of Roger's mother.

"She was very wonderful," he said. "I wish you could have known her, belovedest. She would have been so glad to know that you and I had found each other." A little chill shiver ran through her. He spoke so confidently.

Last of all he took her upstairs into a big room where the gay, jolly wall-paper with its milkmaids and Cinderellas and big and little bears carried you back to the good days when fairy tales were quite the most real part of life.

"This has always been the nursery," he said. "Look." And he drew her forward so that she could see carved across the high, old-fashioned chimneypiece the Heriot motto.

"*'Truth and my sword,'*" he went on. "I grew up with that always before my eyes. And for our children, Cara"—his voice deepened—"it will be there for them too. We'd want them to play the straight game, darlingest—to learn from the beginning that that's the only thing that really matters."

Again she felt that slight, chill shiver run through her. It was like the fleeting touch of a steel blade against bare flesh.

"Yes," she answered mechanically. "We'd want them—to play the straight game."

5

"Why did you send for me? What's wrong, sweetheart?" The tender eagerness of his tone hurt her incredibly. She

knew that after to-day—after she had told him what she had sent for him to tell him—she would never again hear that note in his voice. It had taken her days—or was it years?—to nerve herself to do it, to make up her mind. And yet, dully, subconsciously she thought she must have known all along that she would do this, known it ever since he had spoken of those children—those dream-children of his and hers. "We'd want them to play the straight game." And playing the straight game was sometimes the hardest thing on earth. She knew that, too, now. But she was going to do it, because quite suddenly she found that she couldn't filch from Roger his inheritance—that inheritance of his of a name which had always stood for faith and honour and all that was essentially fine. And if she married him she would rob both him and those dream-children.

In the silence of her little room, high up in the tall grey house in London, she had faced the matter squarely. Deliberately she was going to shut herself out from the splendid, glowing life which would have been hers as Roger's wife—the sheltered, assured life that other women carelessly accepted as their right—and go back to the same old makeshift existence as before, clinging desperately to the fringe of society, cadging—oh, yes, she might as well call the thing by its real name—cadging lunches and dinners and theatre tickets, and even the settlement of overdue dressmakers' bills.

And now Roger was standing in front of her with eager, questioning eyes, waiting to help her, to put right whatever small difficulty might be vexing her. The irony of it!

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

She got it out somehow—the pitiful little story which had been buried more than seven years ago of a man and a woman—a child-woman, hardly out of her teens—and of the sudden reckless flare of passionate love between them. Of a runaway match and a marriage that was no marriage at all, because the man already had a wife, and after a few mad weeks of delirious happiness the inevitable bitter ending.

"His wife refused to divorce him. Instead, she offered to take him back—to forgive him. . . . But for me—for me there was no forgiveness." Cara's voice broke, then steadied again. "So you see, Roger, I can't marry you. I'm not fit—to hand on the torch."

She ceased, and sat with down-bent head and folded hands, waiting . . . waiting through the tense silence which followed for what must come, the scathing denunciation, the scorn . . . the anger of a man who felt himself duped.

"Why did you tell me, Cara?"

That was all. Just that one simple question, very quietly uttered.

With an effort she lifted her eyes to his face. But she could not read his expression.

"Why?" Her hands clasped themselves more tightly together. "Because—after I'd been down to Heriot's Court—I knew that it was no good. I couldn't let you marry me. Our future would only have been founded upon a sham. I—I had to play—the straight game."

Again the silence fell. It seemed to Cara like a high wall closing round her. Roger had moved a little away, and was standing in the window embrasure, his back towards her. It was symbolical, she reflected dully—Roger, always with his face turned away from her, now that he knew—now that he knew——

Suddenly he swung round and, coming over to her side, took her in his arms.

"Belovedest," he said, his voice a little roughened, "I'm so glad—so awfully proud you've told me. I hoped you would some day. Because, you see, I knew it all before."

"You knew it?"

"Yes, I've known all about it ever since we came back to England. Dear Aunt Marian was very careful to make sure I should. But it doesn't matter any more. All that matters is the straight game. *'Truth and my sword.'* And you've played it—magnificently."

CHAPTER IX

THE END OF A RHAPSODY

1

THERE were certain well-defined advantages about Brankscombe Building. It was a tall, gaunt rabbit-warren of a place, where you might rent a room from ten shillings a week upwards, with electric light on the shilling-in-the-slot system, and "find" your own food. You could bestow as much, or as little, furniture as you chose between the four walls of your room without provoking comment, and if at any time—it was generally towards rent-day that this was liable to occur—the lump sum of a shilling for illumination proved too heavy a drain on the exchequer, you could always have recourse to an odd candle-end—either your own, or that of your next-door neighbour.

All sorts and conditions of men and women made their home beneath the roof of Brankscombe Building. It was a human rookery, and, like rooks, its denizens sped forth in the early morning in search of food—or of the work which meant food—returning late in the evening. There were no representatives of the leisured classes at "Brank's," as it was familiarly called by its habitués. From the little dressmaker on the top storey, whose *pièce de résistance* in the furniture line consisted of a table surmounted by a sewing-machine, to Signor Bellerini, Professor of Vocal Culture, on the ground floor—"Lessons given at Pupils' Own Residence"—the occupants of Brank's earned their bread very much on the same principle as did their forefather Adam.

Geoffrey Heriot rented a room midway between the skyey abode of the little dressmaker, and the more expensive

quarters of the professor of vocal culture, and there, by the aid of a piano and the reckless use of quantities of manuscript music paper, he endeavoured to ascend the hill of fame. But that particular hill is sometimes of an almost incredible length and steepness, and his thoughts were more often compulsorily concentrated on the prosaic but absorbing question of how to keep body and soul together rather than on the heights that awaited his climbing.

"They'll have to wait," he reflected, as he seated himself at the piano, and proceeded to play over a little *Danse des Sylphes* of which he had just written the last note.

The winter dusk had long since fallen and fled again before the moon which peered in at the window, and the candle, by the light of which he had been writing, guttered and went out abruptly in a pool of grease. At the same moment the door of his room opened a very little way, and a face thrust itself through the opening—a small, white face beneath a tangled mop of black hair, with a scarlet line of a mouth, and a pair of big, famished-looking black eyes. After peering for a minute, the owner of the face effected a kind of wriggle which insinuated her whole person into the room without increasing by a single inch the narrow aperture between the open door and the wall. She advanced a few steps, and then stood motionless as a statue, all her vitality and soul seemingly concentrated in the great black eyes of her, as she stared at the maker of the gay, frolicsome music. Presently a tremor passed through her body. She swayed a little from the waist, this way and that, her hands and feet moving tentatively to the rhythm. An instant later she began to dance.

She was unbelievably thin, and her lean little body in its short, rusty-black frock swung and swayed on its long black legs with the lightness of a wind-blown flower. She looked like a shadow dancing across the patch of moonlight on the floor.

With a crash the music ended, and for an instant she stood

poised on one foot, arms outstretched, a wholly angelic smile curving her mouth. Then she dropped back suddenly into a normal attitude, and nodded across at the pianist.

"You make ver' good music, you, *mon vieux,*" she remarked with condescension.

Heriot laughed.

"Thanks, Sara. If you were Madame Marie Lopatka now, your approbation might be of some use to me. As it is—well, my 'good music' is worth just *that* to me!" And he tossed six half-crowns on to the table. "That's precisely all my worldly wealth at the present moment. And most of that goes bang next rent-day."

She tossed her head, shaking her tangled mop of raven hair.

"Lopatka!" she exclaimed disdainfully. "Lopatka is—ver' good in her way. But me, I shall be better than Lopatka."

There was supreme conviction in her voice.

"Nothing like having a good conceit of yourself, my child," smiled Heriot.

She stamped her foot, her black eyes blazing.

"It is *not* conceit! But no, not at all!" she protested vehemently. "I was *born* a dancer. *Le bon Dieu* made me one. But *le bon Dieu* did not make Lopatka a dancer. *Oh, non, bien sûr!* It was"—with a chuckle—"the master of the Russian ballet did that."

The mingled humour and pathos of the thing appealed to Heriot. Here was this little half-starved waif—offspring of an invalid mother who earned a meagre living by making artificial flowers, and of a drunken father whose disappearance, a few months previously, had been the only benefit he had ever conferred upon his wife and child—coolly criticising Lopatka, the famous ballerina! And criticising her to some purpose, too. For although Lopatka's technique was beyond praise, it was generally admitted that her interpreta-

tion missed just that fine poetry of conception which would have placed her at the head of the world's most famous dancers.

"Well, I wish I felt equally sure that Providence intended me for a composer," said Heriot, smiling rather ruefully. "Sometimes I feel convinced that I've mistaken my vocation and that I was intended for a bricklayer."

"Non!" Again the black curls bobbed up and down as Sara shook her head vigorously. "You would not make a good bricklayer. Regard me these hands"—making a dive at Heriot's slender, sensitive-looking hand, as it rested on the key-board of the piano, and spreading out the fingers fan-wise. "They are for *la musique.* You will be great one day, *mon ami.* We will be famous together, thou and I. But"—she added vehemently in French—"I should adore thee the same, even wert thou a bricklayer."

Born of mixed French and Russian parentage, there was a characteristic depth of intensity in her passionate declaration. Heriot, his eyes resting on the skinny little figure and on the small, determined face with its always hungry eyes, smiled compassionately. Before her father had betaken himself to pastures new, the young composer had more than once intervened to save her from the beating which the former, in a fit of drunken frenzy, had been hilariously bent upon administering to his offspring. Since then, there had been occasions—when the artificial flowers had failed to sell, and Sara had gone a whole day without food in order that the invalid mother upstairs might not suffer—when Heriot had shared his frugal supper with the child, and once or twice—just after the sale of a manuscript—he had bought her a scarlet ribbon for her hair, thus recognising the necessities of both the inner and the outer woman. In return, Sara had attached herself to him with a kind of elfin devotion that was rather pathetic.

"There is only one thing," she would say thoughtfully—almost regretfully, "that I love more than thee, *mon Geoffroi*

—and that is to dance. When I dance, I am different, somehow—no longer *femme, tu sais!* I feel like a spirit—and spirits do not love. *C'est comme ça.*"

2

"I *should* like to see her!"

As she spoke, Jeanie Heriot pushed aside, with a sigh, the illustrated paper containing a full-page portrait of Madame Sara Lechitzka, the most famous dancer of the day, and pulled towards her a basket filled with socks in various stages of disrepair. "What awful holes you make!" she added, poking a slender, work-worn finger disgustedly through a painfully large gap in the heel of one of them. "Now, if you were Lechitzka it might be comprehensible. But as it is, I can't imagine how you contrive to wear your socks like this!" And she exhibited the hole in question.

"Tramping round to the various music-publishers, I expect," answered Geoffrey Heriot apologetically. "An allowance for 'socks and shoe-leather expended' ought to be included in the contract—on the rare occasions when I get one. It's a dog's life!"

He sighed, and his wife looked across at him with quick sympathy.

"Are things so bad, Geoff?" she asked.

"About as bad as they can be. There's a trifle coming in from that last song of mine, and I've half a dozen or so miserable pianoforte pupils—confound them!"

"And the 'Rhapsody'?" she questioned eagerly. "Have you shown that to any of the publishers yet?"

He nodded gloomily.

"The beggars won't look at it—advise me to stick to writing ballad-songs and let orchestral work alone. 'No opening for it—unless, of course, I could interest some leading conductor in it.'"

"And can't you?"—wistfully.

"I've about as much chance of interesting the sun and moon and stars! No, my dear. Unsuccessful composers, living in Polliver Street, don't get a chance to rub shoulders with the gentleman in fine raiment who waves a little white stick above a heated orchestra, and instils the fear of God into it."

Jeanie sighed. When she had first met Geoffrey Heriot, two years ago, he had just published a fairly successful song, and the ensuing royalties had so tinted the future with rose-colour that there had seemed no valid reason why, when love came along and tangled both their hearts in the same rainbow snare, they should not marry and live happily ever after.

"Once get a start," Geoffrey had assured her, "and one never looks back."

And on the strength of this bold assertion they adventured into the sea of matrimony.

But, unfortunately, Heriot *had* looked back. In fact, he had never done anything else, and it was only by dint of the utmost scraping and saving that the little home in Polliver Street had been kept going at all.

Geoffrey was not of the type to "throw off" tuneful little pot-boilers. He loathed them from the bottom of his sincere musician's soul, and work that is repugnant rarely proves expert—or profitable. So that Heriot's deliberately concocted jingles failed to keep the pot boiling, and as ill-luck would have it, his bigger work, into which he had put the real genius which was his, had never yet obtained a hearing.

It is a lamentable and humiliating truth that, be a boat never so truly built and worthy to skim on the crest of the waves, it needs some one to give it a push-off from the shore before its qualities become apparent. And Geoffrey Heriot had been unable to find a friendly hand to give his frail little skiff the requisite start.

He had had high hopes of the "Rhapsody" to which Jeanie referred. The theme had come to him in a moment of genuine inspiration, and he had laboured for months, cutting

and polishing the jewel of his thought. But when it was completed, and he took it into the market-place, there was none who troubled to look at the work of a man whose name—if it lingered in the memory at all—was associated with the pot-boilers Fate had wrung from his unwilling brain.

So time had slipped by, and with each succeeding week of scraping and paring, and rent-day anxiety, Geoffrey's face had taken on new lines, while Jeanie had laughed a little less and grown shadowy-eyed and rather pinched-looking about the nostrils. But she had never given up hope. Jeanie wasn't that sort, and she had the unshakable belief in the man she loved which seems to be the prerogative of women.

"Never mind, Geoffrey, cheer up," she said, stabbing her needle viciously into the heel of a sock. "You'll get your chance some day. I'm sure of it."

Heriot's eyes softened as they rested on the brown head bent above the sock.

"And meanwhile," he said with forced cheerfulness, "if you're dying to see Lechitzka, you shall. We'll have two bobs' worth to-night in the gallery, and dream of a time to come when it shall be two stalls."

3

"She's absolutely wonderful!" declared Jeanie with enthusiasm, as she set a steaming cup of coffee in front of her husband, and poured out another for herself.

The Heriots had just returned from their "bobs'-worth" of Lechitzka, and Jeanie was bubbling over with admiration for the Russian's marvellous dancing.

"And she gets about five times as much for a single performance as I can make in a year," submitted Geoffrey, by way of a postscript.

The comparison induced reflection, and they were both silent for a moment. Then he continued musingly:

"It's a queer world! I knew Lechitzka half a dozen years ago, when she was just a bit of a lanky kid with a passion for dancing, and without two coppers to rub together."

"You knew her?" exclaimed Jeanie incredulously.

"Yes. She and her mother lived at Brankscombe Building when I had diggings there. Poor little Sara was often half starved, and I've shared my 'sausage and mash' with her many a time. And now—she's at the top of the ladder, while I'm still grubbing about at its foot."

Jeanie stared at him, her brown eyes round with astonishment.

"Fancy your knowing the great Lechitzka," she said impressively. "Why—why—oh, Geoffrey, she could *make* you! If she would only take your 'Rhapsody' and put it on as a dance, you'd be famous the next day."

It was Geoffrey's turn to stare.

"I can just see myself suggesting it to her," he answered grimly.

"But if you were friends years ago? I don't see why you shouldn't," persisted Jeanie. "You did her a good turn then. Now she can pay it back."

"Sounds as simple as the rule of three, doesn't it?" said Geoffrey. He laughed shortly. "No, no, Jeanie. When people get on in the world they forget the friends of their poorer days. Anyway, they don't want the bill sent in—'account rendered for good turns received.'"

"Then—then——" said Jeanie dispiritedly, "you won't ask her—or show her the 'Rhapsody'?"

"No"—with decision. "I can stand being 'turned down' by the publishers—that's in the bond—but I'm hanged if I'll put myself in the way of being snubbed by Sara Lechitzka."

There was a kind of dogged obstinacy in his tones—a bitter, sensitive pride born of manifold rebuffs—and Jeanie realised that it would be useless to press the matter any further at the moment. But the idea took root in her mind, and lingered there quiescent.

As the months wore on, the Heriots' financial outlook showed no signs of improvement, and when winter drew near, bringing in its train increased expenditure in the matter of coals and light, affairs assumed a very gloomy colouring indeed. Jeanie grew more shadowy-eyed than ever, and Geoffrey became irritable and nervy with the perpetual strain. Then he developed a cough, of which, in his state of low vitality, he was powerless to rid himself, and when, at length, the time came that he was too physically weak to go out and give the music lessons which formed the principal source of his income, Jeanie was at her wit's end to know what to do.

It was then that the idea of approaching the great Lechitzka regarding the "Rhapsody" recurred to her like a heaven-sent inspiration.

Warned by Geoffrey's uncompromising attitude on the subject when it had been broached before, she preserved a discreet silence about the matter, so that when she announced her intention of going out "to see a friend," he acquiesced lethargically and without the least suspicion that any deeper project was afoot.

She had already possessed herself of the MS. of the "Rhapsody," and with her heart beating rather high, she set out for the house of the famous Russian dancer.

Arrived there, she asked for Madame Lechitzka with much outward assurance and still more inward trepidation, the latter increasing a hundredfold as a forbidding-looking parlourmaid superciliously inquired if she had an appointment. Indeed, the course of the Heriots' lives might have run very differently but for the fact that, while Jeanie was still politely wrangling about admission with the dragon at the door, Madame Lechitzka herself chanced to descend from upstairs. Perhaps it was merely a vague curiosity that made her pause, or perhaps it was that she caught a glimpse of Jeanie's eager face with its big, imploring eyes like two brown pansies. Whatever it was, the dancer stood still for

a moment, hesitating on the staircase, and to Jeanie it seemed as though she beheld a beautiful black and white vision—a white face gleaming against dusky hair, dark, sombre eyes, and the slenderest of figures gowned in diaphanous black.

With a swift movement, graceful as a cat, Lechitzka came across the hall.

"You wish to see me, is it not so?" she asked, speaking very rapidly and with a strong foreign accent.

Jeanie gasped.

"Oh, yes—yes, please!" she stammered nervously.

Madame Lechitzka smiled and nodded.

"*Bien!* I will see you," she said. And a minute later Jeanie found herself alone with the famous dancer in a room full of mellow golden tints, amidst which Madame Lechitzka's sable figure struck a curious note of austere simplicity.

Stumblingly Jeanie poured forth her tale—of her husband's genius, of their poverty, of how he had struggled against continual disappointment until he had broken down in health, finally winding up with her petition that Madame Lechitzka would hear his "Rhapsody" and produce it.

At the end of this little recital, the Russian looked at her with a glint of humorous amusement in her eyes.

"And why should I do all this for your husband?" she asked dryly.

Jeanie flushed up to the roots of her hair.

"Oh! How stupid of me!" she exclaimed. "Of course, I didn't tell you! You—he—you knew each other—years ago—at Brankscombe Building."

A curious expression passed over the great dancer's face. Her eyes narrowed suddenly.

"At Brankscombe Building?" she repeated. "What—what is your husband's name?"

"Heriot—Geoffrey Heriot," replied Jeanie. Then she blurted out quickly: "You—you used to share his 'sausage and mash.'"

Perhaps the reminder could hardly have been described

as tactful, but the shadow of impending tragedy had swept Jeanie's soul clear of the conventions. And Madame Lechitzka did not seem offended.

"Geoffrey Heriot! The young musician—*l'adoré de ma jeunesse!*" she murmured. "And so, thou, little one, thou art his wife?"

"Yes," answered Jeanie steadily. "I'm his wife. Oh, madame, do help us!"

The dancer was silent, pacing up and down the room with bent head. Jeanie watched the pliant, undulating figure with the longing eyes of a child beseeching a favour.

At last the Russian raised her head.

"But—did you not know?—I have not been dancing lately. I am"—she hesitated—"resting a little."

"But you will," replied Jeanie impetuously, "you will dance again. Oh, madame, it means all the world to us—to Geoffrey and me."

Madame Lechitzka looked at her oddly.

"It means all the world to you—that I dance?" she said slowly. "And—perhaps—it means all the world to me also."

Jeanie stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"Ah, you do not understand?"—smiling a little. "Well, you need not. . . . Now, for this 'Rhapsody.' I will hear it. I will send for my pianist and he shall play it over."

While the "Rhapsody" was being played Jeanie sat with tightly clasped hands, her eyes riveted on the dancer's face, trying vainly to gather from its expression her opinion of the composition. But Madame Lechitzka had resumed her pacing up and down and her face was impenetrable. There was a curious, far-away expression in her sombre eyes.

When the last note had died into silence, she still did not speak for a few moments, and both the pianist and Jeanie sat waiting silently in the sunny, golden room, their eyes fixed on the slight, black-clad figure that seemed, in some inexplicable way, to dominate it.

The dancer appeared unconscious of their gaze, but at last she turned abruptly towards Jeanie.

"I will take your husband's 'Rhapsody,' " she said quietly. "It is very beautiful, and when I have danced to it, it will be famous, and others will want his work."

The pianist jumped up from the piano.

"But, madame——" he began protestingly.

Madame Lechitzka made an arrogant gesture with her hand.

"I have decided," she said. Then, as the pianist seemed still inclined to combat her decision, she added good-humouredly: *"Tais-toi, mon ami.* It is useless to argue with a woman—and, above all, with Lechitzka! I have said that I will dance to this 'Rhapsody.' *C'est fini, alors!"*

4

A great theatre, thronged with the huge concourse of people who had come to see Lechitzka in her marvellous new dance. The music, it was rumoured, was by some unknown young man whom the ballerina had "discovered." He was conducting the orchestra himself to-night, and it was evident that he would no longer be permitted to hide his light under a bushel, for the music and the dancing were blent into so exquisite and harmonious a whole that the vast audience thrilled responsively to each bar of rhythm.

All eyes were fixed on the ethereal figure in its cloudy draperies that flitted, spirit-like, across the stage, swaying, bending, leaping, with outstretched, upraised arms, to the fantastic measure of the "Rhapsody." Gradually the music grew wilder, fiercer, and the dancer quickened to a rapturous abandon which matched it, the lighting of the stage deepening from the pale, wintry moonlight which had ushered in the dance to the passionate rosy flush of awakening dawn and love. At last, with a final rush of chords, the music hurried to its climax, and the dancer, her filmy draperies

transmuted into ruddy gold beneath the limelight, stood like a slender pillar of flame, poised in an ecstasy, reaching upwards with white arms towards an imagined heaven of delight. . . . Then, slowly, inexorably, the curtain fell, shutting out the glowing scene and that embodiment of poetry which was Lechitzka.

A great shout burst from the people, and the tumult of applause, reverberating through the auditorium, increased in volume as the curtain rose in answer to the acclamations.

But, all at once, the thunderous noise died down like the sound of suddenly muted strings, began again hesitantly only to cease anew, then trailed off into a dismayed and dreadful silence.

For on the stage, beneath the brilliant glare of lights, lay Lechitzka—a little huddled heap of white, arms helplessly out-flung upon the floor, motionless, like a bird that has dropped to earth with a broken wing.

Geoffrey, who had been hurriedly summoned from the orchestra, stood on the threshold of the great dancer's dressing-room.

Some one—the doctor, he supposed—came quickly outside the door and spoke to him.

"She wishes to see you," he said in a low voice. "Go in to her at once. She can't last long."

"Can't—last—long?" repeated Geoffrey dazedly.

Only a quarter of an hour age she had been on the stage—the very incarnation of vitality itself! And now, this tall, grave-looking man was saying something ridiculous about her "not lasting long," as one might speak of some one who lay dying.

"I am Madame Lechitzka's medical attendant," continued the doctor very quietly. "I was here in case—of anything like this occurring. . . . It was madness her appearing tonight. Perhaps"—looking keenly at the young musician—"perhaps you did not know that Madame Lechitzka's heart was in a bad state?"

"I? No, I knew nothing," stammered Geoffrey.

"She had been forbidden to dance again—at least, for a year or two. Perhaps, then . . . But now she will dance no more."

He stood aside, and with a slight gesture, invited Geoffrey to enter the room.

Lechitzka was lying on a couch, limp and supine, with closed eyes, all the wonderful energy gone out of her supple limbs. There was a curious resemblance in the drawn, pinched face, its lips rimmed with faint, blue shadow, to the half-starved little dancing-girl of Brankscombe Building.

Geoffrey knelt down beside the couch.

"Sara!" he whispered pitifully. "Little Sara!"

Slowly the closed lids lifted, and the big black eyes—hungry-looking as of old and with the same odd glint of irony in their depths—stared up at him.

"Ah, Geoffrey, *c'est toi, alors!*" The white lips smiled as the whispering thread of voice crept between them.

"Oh, Sara, why did you do it?" he groaned.

"I did it for thee, *mon Geoffroi,* for the sake of the old days. Thy 'sausage and mash' that we shared—*t'en souviens-tu?*" The smile travelled to her eyes and lingered there. "Did I not tell thee, *mon ami,* that we would be famous together—thou and I?"

"But not at this cost," he muttered huskily.

"It is not so great as you think," she began, then sank back feebly, whilst the doctor, standing watchful in the background, hurried forward and held some stimulant to her lips. In a minute or two she revived.

"I should never have danced again, Geoffrey," she went on. "It doesn't matter what the doctors say. Me, I know it! And—after my dancing—it was thee alone that I loved." She panted a little, while the blue shade deepened round her lips. "It is *une petite affaire du cœur* in more senses than one," she added with a flash of her old indomitable gaiety. "Ah! Smile then, *mon ami!* For is it not of a truth well

done? Of the two things I loved best in life, the one has ministered to the other. *Bien sûr!* When she has two loves, a woman's heart may well suffer!" A whimsical little smile flitted across her lips as she jested her way to Death's threshold.

"So thou hast no need to grieve, *mon Geoffroi,*" went on the faint voice. "I have lived—and now I die—just as I would have wished—for my dancing, and for thee. Thou and the little Jeanne, thy wife, will be happy together."

She ceased and lay back with closed eyes, whilst the silence grew and deepened in the room. The doctor drew nearer and stooped over her; then, shaking his head, stepped back to his place, recognising that his work was done.

Presently Lechitzka opened her eyes again.

"Kiss me, *Geoffroi,*" she whispered.

Very quietly, for the first and last time, he kissed her.

Once more, silence.

Then, very faintly from the couch, came the insouciant, rallying voice:

"*Au revoir, mon vieux.*"

And the silence closed down again, unbroken. . . .

CHAPTER X

OLD SINS

1

THE flaring lights of the big London terminus bit into the dusk of the afternoon, while beyond the circle of their radiance, where the great arch of glass roof ended in a sharp, curved line against the leaden sky, the muffled silence of a snow-bound world hung like an impenetrable curtain.

Up country a heavy fall of snow had added to the usual congestion of traffic which prevails at Christmas time, but at last, more than three hours late, the northern express roared its way into the station. As it clanked ponderously to a standstill a sudden stir of life and movement rippled through the scattered figures grouped upon the platform. Porters sprang nimbly towards the opening carriage doors, and people who had been waiting patiently to welcome travellers from the north hurried forward in eager search of them.

Conveying a little suggestion of remoteness from the bustling crowd, a slender woman stepped leisurely down from a first-class carriage and glanced interrogatively about her, as though she half expected some one might be there to meet her. Then, apparently disappointed in this, she hailed a porter. Her quiet gesture met with immediate response. Blind to other gesticulating passengers vainly bidding for his attention, a porter hurried to her side, shrewdly gauging, from her expensive-looking furs and general air of serene detachment, the probable value of the tip he might expect.

She accepted his ready services just as she accepted all the other simplifications of life which came her way, with the assured composure of use and habit, and proceeded to make

her way out of the station to where a closed car waited by the kerb.

"I suppose your master has been detained, Jenner?" She addressed a manservant who had opened the door at her approach and who now stood respectfully in attendance, rug in hand.

"Yes, madam. A telephone message came through to say he would be unable to meet you."

She nodded, as though the answer were what she had expected, and stepped into the car, and a minute later it was sheering smoothly through the snow and slush of the lamp-lit streets.

The woman inside loosened her coat and, leaning back somewhat wearily against the cushions, closed her eyes. A single electric bulb lit the car's interior, pulsing with each inequality of the road's surface, and its fretful light revealed her, slim and graceful, beneath the shrouding of the furs she wore, with a thin, fine-cut face below a sweep of bronze-gold hair. It was an arresting face, with a rather charming air of fragility about it, as though time and circumstance had taken reluctant toll of youth's fresh young beauty. The white, closed lids seemed to guard some secret.

Suddenly the car swerved violently, and the chauffeur crammed on his brakes just in time to avoid collision with a skidding lorry. The woman sat up swiftly, opening startled eyes—wide, golden-brown eyes which held both the simple candour of a child and the mysterious reticence of a woman—a woman who at some time or other has been hurt to the core of her.

Then, as the traffic steadied and the car bore smoothly onward, her tautened muscles relaxed and she sank back once more into her corner. But she did not close her eyes again. The sudden, brief alarm seemed to have roused her effectually, and presently, searching in the handbag she carried, she brought out a letter and glanced eagerly down its closely-written pages. Her eyes lingered on its last paragraph.

I have some news for you concerning Nannette. She is engaged—or, at least, she will be, provided I give my sanction when the favoured swain presents himself for inspection. As a father, I feel glad and proud and sorry all at once. As your husband, dear, I can feel only gladness.

Kester.

Pamela Grant folded up the letter and replaced it in its envelope; then, her slim hands lying idly on her knee, surrendered herself to the train of thought it conjured up.

So Nannette was engaged—or likely to be! Nannette, her stepdaughter, the charming but somewhat difficult girl who had been a thorn in her side throughout the few brief years of her married life. She could scarcely realise that here at last might be a promised end to the continuous friction which seemed to have become an integral part of her existence—the jar and fret which is the inevitable result when two people of hostile temperament and conflicting outlook are doomed to live under the same roof.

When Pamela Trafford had married Kester Grant, K.C., a man nearly five-and-twenty years her senior and rapidly acquiring a reputation as the most merciless cross-examiner at the Bar, her friends had been unanimous in voicing their disapproval. It was shackling a butterfly to an iron stanchion, they declared, and predicted swift disaster.

But the four years which had followed had refuted their gloomy prophecies. Behind the curt, clipped reticence which characterised her husband, Pamela had discovered a delicacy of insight and breadth of understanding which had gone far to still the first faint doubts with which she had entered upon her marriage.

There had been many difficulties to contend with. A triangular relationship invariably constitutes a somewhat complicated problem, but Grant had seemed to understand better than many men might have done, the clash of tempera-

ment between his wife and daughter, and his level judgment and wide sympathy had contrived to hold the balance even between the two women he loved, whose differences were intrinsically rooted in their individual love for him.

There had been moments when Pamela, goaded almost to the limit of endurance by Nannette's quiet, covert opposition, had been tempted to beg her husband to send the girl away from home. Only the knowledge of Grant's deep affection for his daughter had restrained her.

And now it seemed as though, without any effort of hers, in the most natural way in the world, this incessant conflict was to come to an end. With the likelihood of Nannette's marriage and departure to a home of her own, Pamela's whole life took on a new aspect. The future stretched before her full of unalloyed happiness, and when the car pulled up at the tall grey house in Berkeley Square, she was conscious, as her glance swept it, of an uprush of new feeling towards it. Some day, before very long now, this would be her home and Kester's. Theirs only. For a tremulous moment she felt as a bride may feel on the threshold of her new home—captured that thrilling sense of glorious possession of which she had been robbed four years ago.

She ran eagerly up the flight of steps and, when the door swung open, hurried with almost dancing feet across the hall to her husband's study. At the sound of her entrance he rose from a desk crowded with papers. The husband had not yet swamped the lover in Kester Grant, and there was a still passion in the close hold of his arms about her slender body that set her heart racing with a queer, breathless gladness. There was something so sure and splendid about love like Kester's.

"I was sorry I couldn't meet you," he said presently, as he helped her out of her coat. "I knew"—a whimsical smile tilting his clever mouth—"that you'd be aching to hear everything."

"Of course I am. Kester, who is the man? Do you

approve? Wretch!"—shaking him gently—"you gave me no details!"

"Because I'd none to give. I don't even know his name. Nannette refers to him with blissful ambiguity as 'Steve'——"

"How like her!"—smiling.

"And assures me that I'm certain to like him. Apparently he is one of the Appleton house-party and has been a fellow-guest there during the greater part of Nannette's visit."

Pamela nodded.

"So that's how it happened? Go on—tell me the rest."

Grant laughed outright—that quick, unexpected laugh of his which lightened his lean, grave face so extraordinarily.

"I can't go on any further. I'm at the end of the 'information received.' It seems that Nannette and this 'Steve,' whoever he may be, propose to travel back to town together to-morrow, and Nannette has fixed up for him to dine here the same evening. So I'm afraid you must possess your soul in patience until then."

2

Pamela came slowly down the stairs. Her heart was beating rather quickly and at the foot of the staircase she paused, trying to steady herself a bit.

So much—so much depended on this evening! From behind the closed door to her right came a murmur of voices—Kester's, and that of the man who held not only Nannette's happiness, but her own, in his hands. Once the murmur broke in a brief sound of laughter. It was all right then—everything was going smoothly! Kester must like the man. With a quick, nervous gesture Pamela's fingers closed over the handle of the door and turned it.

As she entered the room the two figures standing by the fire swung round towards her. Pamela caught a glimpse of her husband's face, smiling reassuringly, a little humorous

twinkle in his eyes. Then her glance flashed past him and rested on the man beside him—a tall, fair man with curiously brilliant grey eyes beneath opaque white lids and a long-lipped, mobile mouth that might lie or kiss a woman's soul away with equal facility.

As Pamela met the gaze of those grey eyes her breath caught suddenly in her throat. A mist seemed to gather in front of her, blurring the familiar room and everything in it, and she stretched out a frightened, groping hand. Instantly, as though she had offered it in greeting, she felt it clasped and held, while Kester's voice, seeming to come from a great way off, said pleasantly:

"This is Stephen Cairn, my dear."

With the utterance of the commonplace little speech the sense of normality returned to her. The mist rolled away and she found herself shaking hands with Cairn—for it was he who had grasped her outstretched hand a moment earlier, thus covering the helpless, stricken appeal of the unconscious gesture.

"Mrs. Grant and I have met before," he said easily.

"Indeed?" Kester's voice evinced just the ordinary interest which the statement might be expected to arouse.

Pamela's face was a blank mask. Her lips twitched but no words came, and Cairn continued quickly:

"Yes. It was at the beginning of the war. It must be close on six years ago now, so it isn't very surprising"—with ready tact—"if Mrs. Grant has forgotten me."

Suddenly Pamela seemed galvanised into speech. It was as though some one had pulled the strings of a marionette.

"Why, of course," she said jerkily. "I remember now! But—but you were *Godfrey* Cairn in those days, not Stephen."

"I'm still Godfrey to most people. But Nannette"—smiling—"expresses a pronounced preference for my second name."

"I should think I do!" Nannette, boyishly slender, with

sleek hair and attenuated frock revealing almost perfect ankles, swished into the room and joined the group round the hearth. "I should think I do!" she repeated with emphasis. "I hate the name Godfrey. It's odious."

Pamela nodded slowly.

"Yes. I think I hate it, too."

Then they went in to dinner and during the brief passage to the dining-room Pamela's shrinking hand rested on Cairn's arm like a white, unwilling flower.

Somehow, with that desperate back-to-the-wall courage of woman, she continued to play her part of hostess throughout the meal which followed so that no one could have guessed that with the appearance of Godfrey Cairn the bottom had fallen suddenly out of her world.

Godfrey Cairn! As Pamela watched him sitting quietly at her table, deferring to her husband with the ready courtesy of a younger to an elder man, an unobtrusive caress in his manner to Nannette, her thoughts turned painfully backward, back to the time when this same man had marched straight into her life and taken possession of it, blotting out the need for any one or any thing else.

It had all happened in the early days of the war when men and women, rocked by the great tragedy that had rushed upon the world, were caught up by sudden, primal emotions and swept headlong through the broken walls of civilisation into a welter of instinctive human needs, snatching hungrily at life's pleasures lest death should frustrate them.

She and Godfrey had known each other barely a week, but it seemed to her as though they must have cared for one another from the first moment of meeting. And then, before there had been any talk of marriage, he was ordered suddenly to the Front. She could see him now, coming towards her with the telegram still crumpled in his hand, his face very white and in his eyes an aching, stark demand which she sensed even before his stumbling utterance had given it words.

"You'll come, Pam?" he said, holding her very close and speaking with a tense, breathless urgency that shook her very heart. "You'll come? We've just twenty-four hours to be alive and love in. After that, it may be the end of the world for me. And I can't go with nothing—nothing to remember. . . . You're my woman, my mate. Marriage couldn't make us any more each other's than we are, though we'll be married the minute I get back—my first leave. But"—grimly—"in case I never get a first leave——"

To Pamela it seemed as if those eight words left her no choice. Could she send him from her, let him go out into that bleak Beyond, robbed of love's consummation, just because she was trammelled by the swathings of convention—because she was *afraid* to give?

Crushed in his arms, with his eager lips pouring out his need while those dangerous grey eyes of his pleaded for him, she was too much a woman, with a woman's passion for self-sacrifice, to deny him.

So Cairn had his twenty-four hours to live and love in, and when he got his first leave—which, owing to circumstances, did not occur for some considerable time—it so happened that on his very first night in England a friend introduced him to a fluffy little girl with ash-blonde hair and appealing blue eyes, who danced like a bit of thistledown and who had acquired, from an extensive experience of khaki on leave, expert knowledge regarding the shortest route to a man's heart. Cairn married her by special licence four days before he returned to the Front.

In due course Pamela heard of the marriage, and she knew, then, that what had been for her a love so wonderful that no sacrifice was too great to lay upon its altar had been to Godfrey Cairn nothing more than a passing incident. That gift of herself which the near hazard of death had seemed to sanctify was suddenly and horribly converted into a sordid little episode the very memory of which scorched her like a flame.

She endured her hell with a courage that refused to break. Work still remained, and for a time she worked so hard that mental agony was deadened by the sheer bodily fatigue of each day's labour. Then Kester Grant had come into her life, and gradually, at first distrustful that fate could still have any good gift in store for her, she had learned to find peace and happiness in the shelter of his love.

And now the grim, age-old irony of the gods had manifested itself anew. That Cairn, out of all the millions of men there were in the world, should be the one to seek her husband's consent to his marriage with Nannette!

. . . . . .

Pamela never quite knew how she got through the evening. She was conscious all the time that she was merely waiting for the inevitable climax—for the moment when Kester would turn to her and ask her what she thought of Godfrey Cairn.

It came, as she had known it must, when the house door had closed behind Cairn, and when Nannette had reluctantly, with interrogation visible in her eyes, bidden her father good night and gone upstairs to bed.

"Well, Pamela mine, what do you think of him? Not at all a bad chap, I should say."

Pamela was silent, and her husband resumed cheerfully:

"He's all right both as regards family and finances. The only thing against him, to my mind, is the fact that he's a widower—and Nannette is so young."

A widower! So the little fluffy-haired girl was dead! With a vague sort of pity Pamela wondered if she had died in ignorance—before her belief in her husband had been killed. She hoped so.

But—a widower! A widower twice over, surely! She strangled the laugh in her throat. She felt that if once it reached her lips she would never be able to stop laughing.

"Yes. It's a pity he is a widower," she agreed flatly.

Again she felt her throat swell uncontrollably, and again she forced back the rising hysteria, clenching her hands in the effort to keep her hold over herself and to focus her attention on what Kester was saying.

"Still, the main point is the man himself—what's he like. I'm quite satisfied concerning his material status and so on. But you women have a kind of sixth sense in sizing up a man's character. Give me your opinion of Cairn and I shall go nap on it. Is he the right sort of man for me to give my little girl to?"

Pamela stared at him dumbly. Slowly the whole horror of the situation gripped her. Kester, with his belief in woman's instinct, would infallibly be guided by her answer! Actually, the decision as to whether Cairn was to be accepted as Nannette's future husband or not, rested with her!

What was she to do? What answer could she make? If she gave her vote in Cairn's favour, then she was deliberately handing her husband's adored young daughter over to the care of a man whom she knew to be utterly devoid of loyalty and honour—to whom a woman's love would never be anything more than a toy to be mercilessly thrown aside, when he was tired of it, in favour of a newer toy. And if she negatived the man as a possible husband for Nannette, then, notwithstanding his confidence in feminine intuition, she knew that Kester would inevitably seek to know the reasons which had influenced her decision, would probe and question with that searching, trained ingenuity of his until her feeble parryings and defence were broken down and the whole of her bitter secret laid bare before him.

If that happened she might as well be dead. She would have destroyed her own happiness, slain the one thing in the whole world that mattered—Kester's love for her.

"I—I don't know what to say," she began. "I must think——"

She broke off, swaying unsteadily, her face grown suddenly grey. Kester's arm reached out supportingly and

dimly she could see his kind, concerned eyes looking down at her.

"I'm—I'm rather overtired, I think," she said, recovering herself a little.

"I oughtn't to have bothered you." He spoke remorsefully. "You shall go to bed now and tell me what you think of Nannette's young man in the morning. It'll be Christmas Eve, too!"—smiling. "So we'll be able to give the kiddy our blessing and consent among her Christmas presents."

3

Pamela went to bed to toss and turn hour after hour in an agony of mental conflict. Must she do this thing? She need only hold her tongue, let her husband believe she approved Nannette's choice, and her happiness was assured—with the added joy of release from the perpetual strain of Nannette's presence in her home. She dreaded the dawn. She knew that Kester would in all probability reopen the subject at breakfast—and she would still be no nearer a decision.

Morning came at last, and with it a few hours' reprieve. Her maid brought her a hastily scribbled note from her husband:

Just had a 'phone message, darling. An old school chum in trouble, so I must run down and see him. But I shall be back in time for dinner. Will you ring up Cairn—he's stopping at the Ritz—and ask him to dine tomorrow? Nannette shall have her happy Christmas—unless that "sixth sense" of yours forbids!

Pamela's eyes riveted themselves upon the letter. All at once she saw a way out. Cairn himself must save her from the hideous position into which she had been forced. He owed her that much.

She summoned her maid.

"Ring up Mr. Cairn at the Ritz—Mr. Godfrey Cairn—and say we shall be glad to see him here this afternoon."

She thought the informality of the appointment would serve to reassure him, allaying any possible suspicions he might have that the invitation held an ulterior significance, although she realised that she was condemning herself to hours of suspense. She would have liked to bid him come at once!

Nannette was safely out of the way when he came, fulfilling some final Christmas shopping errands which her stepmother had devised for the purpose, and Pamela received him alone, secure from interruption. In a few breathless, uneven words she told him what he must do, and why. He laughed.

"Give up Nannette? Is that what you are asking me to do?"

"Yes, yes!" She clasped her hands tensely. "You can't refuse. Godfrey, you can't refuse!"

He shook his head.

"But I can, and I most certainly do refuse. Why should I give her up—jilt her, in fact?"

"You know why!" With an effort—"You're not fit to marry her!"

His eyes narrowed cruelly.

"Surely as fit—as you were to marry her father?"

The essential truth of the words was like the cut of a lash across bare flesh. She shrank back, staring at him with the eyes of a hunted thing.

"Godfrey——" Her voice choked.

But he remained quite unmoved. The headlong passion he had once felt for her was dead—and there is nothing less pitiful than a dead passion.

"I don't think," he said with a slow smile, "that you are precisely in the position to explain to Grant *why* you don't consider I'm an appropriate husband for his daughter. Do you?"

"I can't let you marry her, Godfrey—I can't!"

"I'm very much afraid you'll have to, my dear girl. I haven't the faintest intention of jilting her to order, I can assure you. And my candid advice to you is to let sleeping dogs lie."

"Is that your last word, Godfrey? Oh!"—desperately. "Won't *anything* move you?"

"Nothing."

He turned to go. The door closed quietly upon his retreating figure and Pamela stood staring dumbly at its blank grey panels. They seemed to scream a negative at her—"Nothing! Nothing!"

On a sudden crazy impulse to beseech him yet once again she flew at the door and tore it open, then peered out, listening. The murmurous quiet of the house drifted up to her unbroken. Then from far below came the muffled clang of the house door as it closed.

Pamela's hand, convulsively gripping the framework of the doorway, dropped away and fell limply to her side. Cairn had gone, and with him her last chance of escape from that sin of long ago. She realised that she must make confession—tell Kester the whole wretched story. There was no alternative.

In her inmost soul she thought she had really known this all along, only she had tried to shut her eyes to the fact—fought hard to believe that, if Godfrey failed her, she could still take refuge in silence and stand aside while Nannette set her feet on that path of disillusionment which any woman who gave her life into Cairn's keeping must eventually tread.

She knew now that she couldn't do it. Whatever the cost to herself, even though all the years of happiness would come crashing down in utter, irretrievable ruin, she must tell Kester the truth.

The remainder of the day dragged slowly and painfully

away. A telegram came from Grant saying that he would not reach home till late in the evening. Nannette 'phoned through to announce that she was dining with friends. Pamela passed the dreary hours in utter solitude.

Outside, she knew, the streets were filled with hurrying crowds of Christmas shoppers, laden with parcels that spelt happiness, transformed from their ordinary workaday selves by that subtle Christmas spirit which seems to evoke something of hope and happiness even in the hearts of the most toil-worn and weary.

Only for Pamela there was nothing left to hope for. She knew, though fifty Christmases might come and go, for her no one of them would ever again bring a message of happiness.

She made the merest pretence at eating dinner, and afterwards drew her chair close to the fire and sat waiting for Kester's return. Now and then she shivered, in spite of the fire's cheery warmth, and once, when some street singers stopped outside the house, she thrust her fingers into her ears to shut away the sound of the familiar carols, nerves scraped raw by the memory of other, happier Christmastides.

Ten o'clock! Eleven! The hours, long enough to hold illimitable pain, yet seemed to race. The strike of the clock in the corner of the room sounded like the tolling of a bell, each stroke dreadfully inevitable and bearing her another instant nearer to the end of everything in life that mattered.

Presently a door opened and closed again downstairs. Then followed a brief murmur of voices and, a moment later, steps—rapid, mounting steps. Kester had returned! Pamela found herself gripping the arms of her chair with straining hands.

"Hello, darling!" Grant came in and crossed the room to her side with the familiar eager tenderness in his greeting. "You got my note all right? Have you asked Cairn for to-morrow?"

Pamela's heart gave a single agonising throb. Then she took up her cue with the deliberate precision of an actor on the stage.

"No," she said quietly. "I've not asked him. Nannette can't marry him."

"Can't marry him? Pamela, what do you mean?" Then, with swift conviction: "You know something against the man!"

She nodded voicelessly. Her lips felt stiff, as though they would not shape the words she sought. When at last she spoke, it was in a harsh, strained voice that seemed to rake her throat as it came.

Somehow she got it out—the whole miserable story of that snatched twenty-four hours which she and Godfrey Cairn had shared together. She offered no excuse, attempted no palliation. Beneath her husband's searchingly grave eyes she felt that excuse was futile.

"Now you know—why Nannette can't marry him!"

He made no answer, but stood gazing at her almost wonderingly. The room seemed filled with a dumb, hopeless silence. She could feel it beating up against her—stifling, crushing her. She turned and stumbled blindly towards the door.

"I'll go . . . I'll go . . ." she whispered.

Then suddenly he was by her side, his arms holding her with a fierceness of possession that took her breath.

"My woman—my brave woman!"

She felt his lips on hers, and yielded unresistingly. She would have just this one moment to remember—to carry with her for the rest of her life!

Presently she tried to push him from her.

"But you haven't understood—you haven't understood——"

"Haven't I? I think I have."

"You can't want me now, Kester—now that you know."

He laughed gently.

"Not want you—now I know you're a hundred times finer and pluckier than I'd thought any woman in the world could be? Oh, my dear, if I could only show you how much I want you! If you weren't my wife"—the whimsical, kind eyes smiled down at her—"we'd go and get married to-morrow!"

The clock in the corner struck the hour—twelve slow strokes, and, as the last one quivered into silence, from the street below rose the fluting sound of a boy's voice, sweet and clear and high.

Pamela, her hand in Kester's, moved over to the window and threw it open. The boyish voice, carolling in the dawn of Christmas Day, seemed to hold a message of hope and understanding and forgiveness.

CHAPTER XI

THE LETTERS OF ROSEMARY

1

THE moon, peeping up over the brown rim of the hill, saw them quite plainly. They were standing in the lane, hardly more than boy and girl, and the evening breeze wafted the scent of summer roses all about them.

The two young faces, peering at each other through the moon-washed dusk, were wrung with the pain of parting—a hard pain and a bitter for youth to bear, because so new and unaccustomed.

"Timothy, I don't know how I shall endure it after you're gone!" exclaimed the girl, laying her hands on his shoulders and looking up with wet eyes. "If only Dad would let us write sometimes, it—it wouldn't be quite so hard."

He nodded.

"Yes, it's a bit rough, Mollie sweetheart, but you'll know I shall be thinking of you all the time."

She gave a little broken laugh.

"You musn't do that—or you'll never make your fortune, Tim. You'll have to keep all your thoughts for the wonderful tales and novels you're going to write. Oh, Tim, how splendid it will be when you come back, a famous author, and march up to Dad and say: 'Now I'm going to marry your daughter.' He won't order you out of the house then, because—poor old Dad!—he loves people who are very rich, or very titled, or very famous—they must be superlatively something."

"Otherwise they're not good enough to marry Miss Mollie Mainwaring, eh?"—laughing rather ruefully. "Sir Robert certainly ordered me off with the utmost alacrity when I

mentioned my ideas about matrimony—but then I'm only superlatively poor."

"You won't always be poor, though"—and she rubbed her cheek comfortingly against the rough tweed of his shoulder. "And I shall wait for you, Tim."

He caught her by the arms and stared down into her face with eager, insistent eyes.

"Will you, Mollie? Swear that you will," he commanded fiercely.

"I swear it, Tim. And if by the time I'm twenty-one—that's in four years—you're not rich enough or famous enough to please Dad—why, I'll run away with you. And he can cut us off with a shilling if he likes."

"He would, too!" replied Timothy grimly.

A footstep sounded a little distance up the lane, and Mollie looked over her shoulder fearfully.

"What's that, Tim? I musn't let Dad find me out here with you."

"Don't be frightened, sweetheart; it's only some one passing up the lane."

But the sound had shaken her courage.

"I had better go," she said nervously. "Oh, Timothy——" She faltered, stretching out her arms despairingly.

He caught her to him, kissing her in rough misery.

"Good-bye, my darling. Mollie, Mollie, God bless you!"

Tearing himself from her clinging hands, he turned, squaring his shoulders as he went, and marched into the summer dusk—marched away to make his bid for fortune.

A few minutes later, Sir Robert Mainwaring came upon his daughter, strolling idly by the river that ran through the garden.

"What are you mooning about here for?" he demanded irascibly. "Sentimentalising over that young fool I sent about his business, I suppose? Come into the house; I want to talk to you."

With outward meekness Mollie followed her irate parent

into the gloomy purlieus of the library, his own particular sanctum, and, seating herself in an enormous arm-chair which nearly engulfed her slim person, prepared to do battle.

Sir Robert established himself in a commanding position on the hearthrug—the library hearthrug at Mainwaring Park was almost as sacrosanct as Queen Victoria's—and proceeded to lay down the law to his offspring.

"You quite understand, Mollie, that there's to be an end of this silly nonsense about young Gale. He's no match for my daughter"—arrogantly—"and I forbid you to have anything more to do with him—anything whatsoever."

Mollie's small chin was as obstinate as a pretty chin can be; in fact, it was a miniature *édition de luxe* of Sir Robert's own.

"I shall marry Timothy as soon as ever he's made his fortune," she replied. "You won't be able to object then."

"Pooh! Made his fortune! He isn't going to do that by quill-driving, so you needn't hope for it."

"I do hope for it," retorted Mollie determinedly. "And not only that, but I'm quite sure he will. Timothy's a genius," she added conclusively.

"Genius? Fiddlesticks!" Sir Robert snorted contemptuously. "A bank balance is what's wanted in a husband, not genius. Some day you'll have ten thousand a year of your own. Ten thousand a year," he repeated comfortably, "and when a man comes along who can bring ten thousand to meet it and a name as good as your own—that's the man I shall choose for your husband. By that time"—sarcastically—"Timothy Gale's 'genius' may be bringing him in an income of two hundred a year. It wouldn't surprise me."

2

"Refuse those and accept these, and bring me the business letters for signature after lunch."

Timothy Gale dismissed his secretary and sat down to a

table littered with manuscript. A bundle of galley proofs caught his eye.

"Wait a moment, Carter." The secretary paused on his way to the door. "There are those proofs of 'The Way of a Dream'—you'd better put them through to-day. Machim & Co. are in a deuce of a hurry for them."

The door closed quietly behind the secretary, and once more Timothy turned to the heap of manuscript that lay on the table before him.

He turned the sheets idly, his thoughts a-wander.

"'The Way of a Dream,'" he muttered. "'The Way of a Dream'—very much the way of happiness, I think, vanishing just as you think you're going to grasp it. And you who swore you would wait for me, Mollie!" he added.

He sighed lightly, shrugging his shoulders. For, after all, ten years had passed since he and Mollie had taken their passionate young farewell of each other in the moonlight—ten busy, strenuous years which had converted the unknown Timothy Gale into the popular novelist whose work, under the pen-name of "Marvin Leigh," could hardly be turned out fast enough to please the publishers and the public.

Timothy had made his fortune, but apparently Mollie hadn't waited for him. He had written to her several times at the end of the first three years, when his future was beginning to show a rosy promise, but he had received no reply, and finally, a letter which he wrote a year later, begging for an answer, was returned to him by the G.P.O. with "Not known" scrawled across the envelope.

He had instituted inquiries, but all he had been able to ascertain was that Sir Robert Mainwaring was dead, that his property had been sold, and that his daughter had gone away, leaving no address, and it was believed that she had married. There the trail had ended, and for a time Timothy was badly hurt. Then the sting of the knowledge that Mollie had not waited, but had married some one else without ever a word to him, neglecting even to answer his letters, whipped

him into a more normal, if somewhat embittered, frame of mind, and gradually, immersed in his work and with his time very fully occupied, his recollection of that early romance of his became a little blurred and indistinct, no longer holding any poignancy of pain, but lingering in his memory like some tender, gracious dream. It had been just a boy and girl affair, fragment of youth's high hopes and enthusiasms—a pretty episode upon which he could look back with a kindly, indulgent smile.

But there had been no other woman in his life. Women, yes—what popular novelist who adds good looks and personal charm to his other gifts escapes?—but no one particular woman who had ever dominated his life in the smallest degree.

"And I don't think one ever will now," he muttered grimly, following out his train of thought to its logical conclusion.

As he spoke, his fingers, trifling with the pages of his manuscript, encountered something of a firmer substance—a letter, still unopened, which he had evidently overlooked in going through his morning's correspondence.

The envelope was fat and thick, of hand-made paper, and sealed at the back with the impress of an old-fashioned Cupid seal. The handwriting was a distinctly feminine one, fine and rather spidery-looking.

Timothy groaned.

"Another of 'em!" he muttered, smiling wryly.

Did he not know, only too well, the enthusiastic outpourings of soulful young women who had found in his writings balm for their broken hearts, and who wanted to tell him all about it? He was deluged with such epistles.

He was about to pitch the letter into the fire when something in the handwriting arrested him. It bore a faint, far-away resemblance to the sprawling hieroglyphics that had adorned those little cocked-hat notes with which Mollie used to punctuate the dulness of a day when circumstances for-

bade a meeting. Allowing for the development of years the envelope might almost have been addressed by her.

Half smiling at the thought, Timothy slit open the flap and withdrew the folded sheet from within. A faint fragrance assailed his nostrils, vague and evanescent; he could not put a name to it, but it reminded him of potpourri and lavender and all sweet country scents. Almost he could see again the lane where he and Mollie had parted, the air heavy with the perfume of roses.

His eyes skimmed lightly over the first two pages, and then, his brows contracting with sudden interest, he turned back to the beginning and read the whole letter carefully through.

It was a curious letter, dealing with his writings, of course, but in a fresh, original way, and with such extraordinarily clear perception that it made pleasant reading indeed to the author.

The unknown correspondent had sensed the atmosphere of discouragement which, notwithstanding his success, cropped out in his work—a kind of discouragement with life, a suggestion of *aloneness*. Perhaps her own solitariness—for she had told him that she lived alone, "in an old maid's solitude" she put it—had supplied her with the key to his, and though there was no single sentence in the letter that actually gave expression to her sympathy, yet the whole breathed such a comprehending, delicate interest that Timothy's heart warmed towards her.

There was no address on the letter; otherwise he would have been sorely tempted to break his most stringent rule regarding such epistles and reply to it. It was signed quite simply, "Rosemary," and impulsively he picked up his pen, and drawing a sheet of scribbling paper towards him, headed it "Rosemary, That's for Remembrance."

The little article for which the following hour was responsible was one of "Marvin Leigh's" most charming efforts —delightfully spontaneous, informed with an exquisitely

tender understanding of the human soul—the prose almost transmuted into poetry.

He appended his signature and sent it off to a journal to which he was a regular contributor, and his last thought that night, as he drowsed off into slumber, took the form of an anxious wonder as to whether "she" would see it.

She did, and another letter in the same spidery handwriting lay on his plate at breakfast a week after the publication of the article.

The second letter brought her much nearer to him. Her personality crept out in it—a little shrinkingly still, as though she were not even yet quite sure that she would be really welcome—and it was so charming a one that Timothy wasted quite a lot of time in mentally picturing what manner of woman she might be. She was not really an old maid—of that he was convinced. The letters breathed the spirit of youth itself, and she was witty and clever and sympathetic, and he felt sure her hair was brown—a warm brown with red lights in it.

She still elected to hide behind the anonymity of "Rosemary," and this second letter, like the first, bore no address. The only clue he could find to her whereabouts was the postmark, "St. Jude-in-Roseland," a little village which reference to the Ordnance map informed him lay tucked away on the side of a Devonshire hill.

It was obviously impossible, however, to address a letter to her with the sweet simplicity of " 'Rosemary,' St. Jude-in-Roseland," and his mind utterly rejected the notion of making inquiries and so eliciting what she obviously wished kept hidden. To his fine perception such a procedure would have seemed like forcing the delicately closed up petals of a bud to unfold before their time.

No, he would wait patiently until she chose to reveal herself. But, meanwhile, a way of responding to her letters presented itself to his eager mind, and very shortly there appeared, in a periodical called *The Dreamer,* the first

instalment of a series entitled "Letters of Remembrance."

It was written exactly on the lines of a letter, purporting to be a reply to one received, and created quite a small furore by its beauty of form and idea. Several of the reviews commented on it and congratulated the author, Marvin Leigh, on the delicacy of its workmanship, stating confidently that the next of the series would be anticipated with interest.

Duly it brought its reply from "Rosemary"—direct and frank this time, as though the writer were prepared to trust to the friendship shown so plainly in the first of the "Letters of Remembrance."

> *How can I thank you?* (she wrote). *If my letters, written from this dull little corner of the world, have brought you—as you say they have—a breath of country sweetness into your turmoil of the town, yours to me have been like a whiff of the brave salt breezes of the sea, blowing away the mists that hung above the quiet backwater where my barque is anchored.*

The touch of wistfulness in the last sentence brought a tender smile to Timothy's face. Some day he would go down to that quiet backwater, and loosing her barque from its moorings, steer it away—away on to the wide sea of love.

Yes, of love itself. From the very first he had found something peculiarly charming in this interchange of thoughts and ideas with a mind so curiously akin to his own—this dream-like friendship of the spirit—and now, as the closely-written missives never failed to reach him in answer to the monthly appearances of the "Letters of Remembrance," he found that his vision of the "Rosemary" who penned them was the vision of the woman whom he loved.

3

It came about quite unexpectedly—Timothy's meeting with Mollie Mainwaring. Just a haphazard acceptance of

one from amongst a dozen dinner invitations that had befallen him, and he found his hostess convoying him towards a strangely familiar figure and murmuring a confused blur of names by way of introduction.

"Why, Tim——" And Mollie, little changed for all that ten long years had slipped away since he had seen her last, held out her hand in the old impulsive way he remembered so well.

"So you know each other?" smiled the hostess. "Now, how nice! It won't take you till the entrée, then, to find out each other's pet aversions."

Timothy found himself watching with fascinated eyes while Mollie stripped off her long white gloves, waiting, with a curious sensation of rebellion in his heart, to see the plain band of gold which he knew would be gleaming on her third finger, and which, years ago—oh, centuries ago!—he had once hoped to place there himself.

But when she had freed her hands he looked down at them in amazement, for her white, slim fingers were as ringless as his own.

"Where's your wedding ring?" The words leaped from his lips before he was aware.

She turned and stared at him, the quick, vivid colour flying up into her face.

"My wedding ring?" she murmured.

Timothy felt the red blood rush into his own cheeks.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered. "But I thought—I understood you were married."

Mollie's eyes fell away from his.

"You thought wrong," she said quietly.

The chill, brief words were like the hoisting of a signboard with *NO TRESPASSERS ALLOWED* painted on it in large letters, and Timothy hastily led the conversation away into the paths of safety.

By the time the entrée was reached they had switched on

to a literary line, and Mollie innocently inquired if he had read "The Way of a Dream."

"Been obliged to," he answered grimly. "I'm the poor devil that wrote it."

"You? You are—Marvin Leigh?" She spoke slowly, and there was amazement in her eyes, amazement and something else—something almost resembling consternation.

"I plead guilty," he replied, smiling.

"Then—then it was *you* who wrote those 'Letters of Remembrance' in the *Dreamer?*"

The words broke from her almost in a whisper, and as Timothy turned to answer her, the scarlet flamed in her cheeks once more—a shamed red that died even the round, young palpitating throat and the tips of her little ears.

Timothy remained staring at her a moment, silent in the grip of the immense awakening that had come to him. That tell-tale flush, the similarity of the hand-writing, the amazing *understandingness* of his unknown correspondent—it was all explained now. The whole thing leapt into vivid shape in his mind upon the instant; Mollie—she herself, and not another woman—was his dream lady, his lady of the letters! And with that thought came another—that she loved him still. For "Rosemary" had loved some one once in the closed book of the past; he had read it between the lines of those letters written from "an old maid's solitude."

There were worlds to be explained between them, but that could come later; it was enough for the moment to know that she still loved him. Meanwhile, that agonised blush and the sudden, stricken look in her eyes imperatively claimed his help, and with a wonderful lightness of heart he came to her rescue.

"Yes. I wrote the 'Letters of Remembrance.' Nice of you to have read them. Did you like them?"

"They—they were very beautiful," she said in a low voice.

"I wanted them to be," he answered simply. "I'm so glad you liked them—Mollie."

"I think," she said gently—"I think that any woman would have liked them. I'm sure the 'Rosemary' you wrote them for—that was the name, wasn't it?—must have liked them."

Timothy rejoiced.

"I hope she did," he said. And then they slid away to other topics, for a dinner-table is not the appropriate setting for a reconciliation.

A conservatory approaches more nearly to it, and it was here, in the dimly-lit, green-scented warmth, that Timothy turned back the pages of the years that were gone.

"Mollie, why did you never answer my letters?"

Mollie stared at him.

"Your letters? Why, you never wrote me any. You—you forgot to come back when you were famous."

The bitterness in her voice was pitiful to him—pitiful as the silent crying of a child.

"Forgot to come back?" he repeated. "Oh, Mollie, Mollie! Thank God we've met in time—in time for explanations. We might have passed our whole lives without knowing. Mollie—sweetheart—I wrote you again and again, and you never answered me."

"I never had the letters," she said slowly. "Are you sure—sure that you wrote—to Mainwaring?"

"Sure. And my last letter came back to me through the Dead Letter Office."

"Tell me, when did you write? How many years ago?"

"I first wrote just three years after I went away. I was getting on well then, and I thought your father might reconsider his decision. I wrote several times, and had no answer. Then, a year later, I wrote again; that was the letter that came back to me."

Mollie nodded her head.

"Yes. I had left Mainwaring then. But—but the year

before—oh, Tim! Dad must have stopped those letters from reaching me! Oh, how could he?"

A sudden sob shook her.

"I thought, when I got no reply, that you meant to show me that—it was all over," said Timothy slowly.

"And I thought—you'd forgotten."

A silence fell between them. Timothy was thinking hard and bitter thoughts of the man who had come between them, and almost as though she read what was in his mind she said loyally:

"He meant it for the best—poor dad."

"He's robbed us," broke out Timothy savagely—"robbed us of seven years."

Mollie's hand stole out to his.

"He's dead, Timothy; don't say anything. We've—we've got plenty of years left, dear."

And with that he caught her in his arms, crushing her to him, and kissed her as though he would never let her go.

* * * * * * *

"And how was it you came to leave Mainwaring?" he asked presently. "If it hadn't been for that you would have received the last letter I wrote you."

"Yes, dad was dead then. But—didn't you ever hear?—his affairs were in an awful state. He—he had been speculating and there was nothing left. Everything had to be sold to pay his debts."

"And you?" Timothy's arm tightened in its clasp. "I heard that you were married."

"Married? Oh, no. I got a situation as governess to a little boy."

"You—doing that? Oh, my dear, and all the time I had more money than I knew how to spend! Mollie"—jealously—"what are you doing now—not governessing?"

"No"—with a little smile—"companioning. I'm companion to a Mrs. Danton."

"You shan't be a day longer, then. We'll be married to-morrow."

"Oh, no, we won't." With happiness Mollie was reverting to her charmingly autocratic self once more. "I couldn't leave Mrs. Danton in the lurch like that—she's been awfully kind and nice to me. But"—glancing at him mischievously—"I'll marry you as soon as ever she's 'suited' herself, as the servants say."

And with that Timothy had to be content.

When he reached home he remembered that he had never challenged Mollie, after all, with the writing of "Rosemary's" letters, and, chuckling a little to himself, he determined that now he would let her believe her secret undiscovered until after they were married. Then, one day, he would inveigle her into a confession and finally tell her that it was no news to him, but that he had known about it all the time, and had written accordingly.

A week later came another letter from "Rosemary," and this time she told him that letters addressed "Rosemary, c/o Mrs. Giles, St. Jude-in-Roseland,' " would find her.

Timothy smiled with tender amusement at Mollie's pretence, at her little effort to throw dust in his eyes now that they were actually engaged, by continuing to write letters as the unknown "Rosemary" so that he might not suspect her. Quite suddenly an altogether delightful idea presented itself to him: he would respond with a real love-letter. The quaint conceit of carrying on an anonymous correspondence with the lady of his heart appealed to some whimsical strain in him, and taking up his pen he wrote just such a beautiful, tender, delightful love-letter as might be expected from the author whose mind had created the "Letters of Remembrance."

The day he posted it he asked Mollie casually if she chanced to know of a little place called St. Jude-in-Roseland.

"It has such a charming name," he said, "that I'm sure

it must be a charming place—the sort of place for a honeymoon, Mollie."

She had blushed a little and owned to a previous knowledge.

"Mrs. Danton and I used to stay there," she had said.

That was exactly what Timothy had surmised, and thereafter he wondered whose services she had requisitioned to post the "Rosemary" letters for her from the little Devon village after her return to London.

4

Mrs. Danton was able to "suit" herself with another companion within another fortnight, and Timothy and Mollie had been married exactly a week, and had passed seven blissful days at St. Jude-in-Roseland—which was quite as pretty as it sounds—when Timothy received an answer from "Rosemary" to the love-letter he had written her when she sent him her address.

He stared at the envelope, which had been redirected to him from London, in some surprise. He had hardly expected Mollie to reply, but it was just like her to appreciate the whimsical charm of the idea and to follow it up, and he carried the letter away with him to peruse in luxurious solitude in the garden.

It was full of the same delicate charm as "Rosemary's" former letters, and the way in which Mollie had endeavoured to preserve her incognito, by raising insuperable objections to the meeting for which in his last letter he had pleaded, brought a smile, half humorous, half tender, to his lips.

It is sweet indeed to feel that I am loved (wrote "Rosemary"). *But, dear, let me still remain your "Dream Lady," as you have called me. There are barriers between us we can never pass. Age is one. I don't believe you have ever realised how old I am, and I love you for it, for I* feel *young, although the mirror tells another tale.*

"Little minx!" muttered Timothy, amused.

He read on:

And, as I told you long ago, I am anchored here in my little haven, and life for me—life, as you understand it in your glorious youth—has quite passed by.

Timothy was a little puzzled by this part of the letter; it seemed so sincere—so wistfully sincere. Mollie was really letting her imagination run riot in her efforts to guard her secret.

He strolled back to the house, mentally complimenting her upon her unsuspected gift for imaginative writing.

"I've had another letter from 'Rosemary,'" he remarked.

"What—from your 'Dream Lady,' as you call her? You'll have to write some more 'Letters of Remembrance,' Tim—a second series."

"I don't think it's necessary," he replied sedately.

"Oh, you mustn't leave her letters unanswered. It would be so unkind," she smiled back at him.

He made no reply for a moment. Then he said meaningly:

"I know who 'Rosemary' is."

"Oh, do you?" she exclaimed. "How did you find out? I was so jealous of her at one time. Do you remember when you told me at that dinner that you were 'Marvin Leigh'? I was sick with misery, because I felt I had lost you altogether, and yet I had to try and behave as though I didn't care a rap. I was quite sure you must be in love with the woman to whom you could write such letters."

"Little actress!" ejaculated Timothy mentally. But aloud he said composedly: "So I was."

"You—you were?" faltered Mollie.

"Yes—because I think the lady's name is Mollie Gale—*nee* Mainwaring."

She shook her head.

"Quite wrong, Tim. *I* never wasted my time writing anonymous letters to 'Marvin Leigh,' I can assure you."

"*You didn't?*" He stared at her blankly. "Is that really true, Mollie? Answer me!"

"Perfectly true. Why, does it matter? What makes you look like that, Tim? What is it?" A hint of panic showed itself in her voice, for his face had whitened and there was an expression of suddenly awakened horror in his eyes.

"Good God, Mollie, it isn't—it can't be true!" he gasped hoarsely. "Don't tell me you didn't write those letters?"

"But I didn't, dear—I didn't really. Oh, Tim, do tell me what is the matter!"

"Why—why——" stammered Timothy, his voice shaking. "Oh—it's horrible, Mollie! The others didn't matter so much—*but my last letter!* I made sure it was you, and—and I wrote a love-letter—a love-letter to 'Rosemary,' telling her—why, telling her all I should have told you, all that was in my heart." He paused, then added in dry, rigid tones: "And she's answered it."

He held out the letter, and as Mollie took it from him she saw that his hand was trembling.

She read it through, then lifted a white, dismayed face, her eyes brimming over with tears.

"Tim, Tim, you have made her so happy," she said tremulously. "Oh, my dear, how dreadful it all is! What can you do? You mustn't—you *can't* tell her it's none of it true."

"No," he answered dully. "I can't do that. I must—I must just cease writing to her."

Mollie's brows drew together.

"That would mean hurting her so."

He nodded drearily.

"Well, what can I do? I can't tell her the truth. Tell me"—harshly—"what *can* I do?"

But there came no answer. There was nothing—nothing

he could do that would repair the bitter, pitiful blunder he had made.

5

It was a very sobered Mollie that set out the next day to visit an old friend who lived in the neighbourhood.

She and Timothy had discussed the matter of the letters to "Rosemary" until they were weary, but they were no nearer a solution of the difficulty, and at last Mollie had left her husband to ponder over it alone.

"Perhaps I shall find some way out," he had said, but there had been no promise in his tones.

Mollie turned in at the gate of the little cottage which was her destination and walked slowly up the flagged path. The tiny garden on either side was a riot of summer flowers —all the sweet old-fashioned blooming of the country. Big, tall hollyhocks swayed in the breeze, nodding to the slender foxgloves, while, side by side, lavender and roses gleamed like amethyst and crimson jewels against an emerald carpet of fragrant mignonette.

"Miss Penelope?" asked Mollie of the servant who opened the door.

"Why, I declare, tez Miss Mollie!" exclaimed the woman in the soft drawling tones of the West Country. "Miss Penelope'll be plaized to see you, miss. Though she's obliged to keep her room now, you'll be main sorry to hear. I'll just tell her, if so be you'll come upstairs."

Mollie followed the broad, sturdy figure up the narrow staircase and into a low-roofed bedroom, sweet and fresh and dainty with chintz and flowers.

In the big, four-poster bed, propped up against the pillows, lay a little frail woman, looking all the more fragile and diminutive by contrast with the massive proportions of the bed. A frilled muslin cap, coquettish with lavender ribbons,

crowned the soft grey hair that framed her face—a face that with its delicate features and soft blue eyes must have been lovely enough to break a heart or so in days gone by. But now the skin was waxen white and the blue eyes a little faded—like hyacinths washed with rain.

"So you are 'married and a',' my Mollie," said Miss Penelope presently. "It's good, dear child, to see the course of true love run smooth. Oh, I know what love is"—nodding her head—"though I am an old maid."

"And I can't think why you are," broke out Mollie impetuously. "It's a shocking waste."

"My dear"—the hyacinth eyes grew misty—"I threw away my happiness once—youth is headstrong, you know, and doesn't count the cost. And I've paid for it, day by day, in solitude ever since." She hesitated. "No, not quite ever since. God has been very good to me and sent me a great love—a great, understanding love—to sweeten the last years of a lonely life. We have never met, but I know he cares, and I could not love him more if we had been together always."

She slipped a thin hand underneath her pillow, and withdrew a little package of letters, tied together with a lavender ribbon. A sprig of withered rosemary was thrust through the knot of the ribbon.

"These—these are his letters," went on Miss Penelope, a delicate wild-rose colour suddenly tinting her waxen cheeks. "And when—when the end comes, Mollie, I want you to see that they are buried with me. I think"—dreamily—"if I had them in my hand, I could lie and rest quite patiently till we meet—he and I." She paused. "Will you do this for me, my dear?"

Mollie was gazing at the little package of letters as though fascinated by it, and Miss Penelope, following her glance, smiled.

"Yes, they are funny letters, aren't they?" she said, her

eyes twinkling with amusement. "Printed—but they are love-letters all the same. And there is—just one—written by his own hand."

She pulled the ribbon a little aside so as to reveal the uppermost letter of the packet, and Mollie, with a strange tightening about her throat, found herself staring horror-stricken at her husband's handwriting.

So little Miss Penelope was the "Rosemary" of the letters—the woman to whom they had brought a tender, secret happiness, a dream-like wraith of love.

The tears were pouring down Mollie's cheeks as she laid her young hand over the slight, frail one jealously clasping the letters.

"Oh, my dear, my dear, I will do all, just—just as you would wish," she said gently.

A look of peace came into the tired face beneath the frilled cap, jaunty with its lavender ribbons.

"Thank you, dear; I was sure you would." Miss Penelope leaned back against her pillows, a little weary with the effort of talking. "Come and see me again, Mollie. It won't be very long, now, before I go—to wait for him. But—but perhaps there may come another letter. He is so good—he never keeps me long without an answer."

. . . . . .

Mollie and her husband were standing together in the scented dusk of their little garden.

"She must never know," Mollie was saying. "And you must not let her miss the letters—dear little Miss Penelope. Till—till the end, Timothy, you will go on writing?"

"Yes," he answered gravely. "I will go on writing." He took her in his arms and kissed her very tenderly and gently. "God bless you, dear, for understanding."

So the letters went to and fro once more though the delicate spidery handwriting grew fainter with each attempt.

At last there came a day when Mollie was hurriedly sent

for to the cottage, to find Miss Penelope propped up, shadow-like, against her pillows—so frail that it seemed almost as though a breath of wind might bear her away.

In her hand she held Timothy's last letter.

Rosemary dear—he had written—*I've just been reading your letter and I feel such a brute, because in it you tell me you are ill, and yet I may not come to you. But since you yourself have set a barrier between us, which can never be broken down in this world, why, let me tell you that your letters—your dear letters, always fragrant of lavender—have been one of the most wonderful and beautiful things in my life. Always remember that, Rosemary. Perhaps it may comfort you at times. There come those times of loneliness to all of us.*

Miss Penelope met Mollie's eyes with a smile of purest happiness.

"I've heard again, Mollie," she said. "Such a dear letter. It won't be hard to go now; I've had so much—*so much* out of life, after all."

And with the dawn, little Miss Penelope, whose dream romance had given what seemed "so much" to her humble soul, fared gladly forth to the bigger world that lay waiting for her beyond the border-line where life meets death.

Mollie cried softly as she told her husband of the utter happiness which his last letter had brought with it.

"But oh, Tim," she whispered. "What about the *awakening?* She has loved you so, and when she finds out—where she has gone—that it was all a mistake—what then?"

Timothy smiled serenely, confidently. For him that awakening held no fear.

"Oh, my dear, she'll understand then—we shall all understand—that no love is ever lost."

CHAPTER XII

COMRADES

1

THE big fire crackling on the hearth threw flickering shafts of light across the room, picking out the gleaming surfaces of polished woods and the soft, warm lustre of tortoiseshell and gold upon the dressing-table. Its light fell, too, upon the still figure of a woman sitting in a chair, her bare feet, thrust into little blue mules, resting on the low kerb. Her hands lay folded upon her knee—slim, pointed members which seemed to hold something of despondency, almost of despair, in their quiet folding. The same shadow of unhappiness touched her face. The red mouth, with its short upper lip surely made for laughter, drooped wearily at the corners, while the grey, dissatisfied eyes which stared into the fire glowed sombrely as though with a curious conflict of emotion.

Suddenly from below came the dull thud of the house door closing. The woman started nervously at the sound, half made as though she would rise, then sank back into her chair again. But this time her body did not relax as before. She sat rigidly upright, her slender hands grasping the chair-arms, her small, dark head a little turned, her ears strained to catch the sound of mounting footsteps which were drawing nearer and nearer.

A minute later the door was flung hurriedly open, and a man's voice—quick and dominating—shattered the silence.

"'Fraid I'm late—hallo!"—as the dusk met him like a wall. "All in the dark? How's that? Aren't you dressing yet?"

"No." The answer came tonelessly.

With a muttered exclamation the new-comer fumbled for the electric switch and snapped it down, flooding the room with light. For an instant Leslie Daimer shielded her eyes with her hand from the sudden glare. Then she turned and faced her husband.

He was a big, powerfully-built man—a complete contrast to her slender femininity—with determined brows overhanging keen, hazel eyes which held more than a hint of temper in their depths. Below an arrogant, jutting-out nose, the closing of his long-lipped mouth reminded one of a rat-trap, and the square, thrusting jaw completed the impression of a primitive, virile force that would not easily brook opposition. The men who worked under Daimer and the big financiers in the city who had not infrequently opposed him in some huge deal on the share-market had one and all learned to know that opposition only served to rouse in him a dogged tenacity which invariably carried him through to victory. "You might as well try to batter down a brick wall with your bare hands as fight Bruce Daimer." It was a common saying among both friends and foes. And his wife, the dark, fragile woman who had borne his name and shared his wealth for seven long years—the longest years of a life which barely counted five-and-twenty in all—she, too, had learned to know that indomitable will of his—to know it and yield to it.

"What the devil——" With an effort, Daimer checked the hasty ejaculation which broke from him as he perceived his wife to be still attired in a soft *négligé* that clung persuasively to the supple lines of her figure. "Why aren't you dressing? You know we're due at the Porthamores' crush to-night?"

"I know."

"Well, it's an occasion for full war-paint, isn't it?"—half smiling. When Bruce Daimer smiled it redeemed his face of all its dominating arrogance. There was something curiously attractive about his smile. Even now, after seven

disillusioning years of matrimony, Leslie recognised that fact.

"Do you think it is?" she answered wearily. "Do the Porthamores—matter much?"

"They do," he returned incisively. "Porthamore's chairman of too many important concerns to be in any way a negligible quantity. Besides, have you forgotten what day it is?"

A sudden nervous flush stained her cheeks. She had not forgotten, but inwardly she had been hoping that he had. It was her birthday, one of the three occasions in the year which her husband chose to convert into a little private fête day. The other two were the occasion of his own birthday and the anniversary of their wedding-day. Invariably these eventful days had hitherto been celebrated by Daimer's taking a holiday from city affairs and spending the day alone with his wife. They would run out somewhere into the country in the big touring car which he drove even better than Jenkins, the extremely competent chauffeur, and finish up with a little gala dinner at some restaurant in town where they could dance together afterwards. To Leslie these anniversaries represented nothing more than a bitter travesty of what such days should mean.

And this morning she believed he had forgotten that it was her birthday. He had hurried off to the city earlier than usual, without making any reference to it, apparently solely intent upon some big financial *coup* he hoped to bring off.

"No." She answered his question mechanically. "No. I had not forgotten."

"But you thought I had, eh?" He laughed triumphantly. "Does this look like it?"

Followed the click of a spring, and the next moment he had tossed a jeweller's velvet case carelessly on to the floor and was holding out towards her a flexible bracelet of magnificent sapphires that smouldered darkly under the glare of the electric lights.

Leslie slipped it on to her wrist.

"It is very beautiful," she said unemotionally. "Thank you, Bruce."

"That all?" he queried.

She knew perfectly well what he meant, heard the demand in his voice. But she chose to ignore it. Very quietly and deliberately she turned away.

"I must dress," she said. "It is getting late."

As though her tacit refusal of his demand roused some devil in him, he caught her by the shoulders and twisted her round towards him.

"You'll kiss me first!" he said harshly.

For a moment she hesitated as if tempted to defy him, then, with a slight shrug of her shoulders, she yielded and lifted her face impassively to his. His arms closed round her, his mouth crushing down on hers with a passion that seemed whipped into fiercer flame by her very coldness. All at once he flung her away from him, so roughly that she had to catch at the dressing-table for support.

"Damn it! I wonder sometimes if I married a woman or an iceberg!" he exclaimed stormily. "You've about as much warmth about you as the latter, anyway. That's all I know."

"Perhaps you don't know much," she answered slowly. "You don't know the real me—at all, Bruce."

Involuntarily she had voiced the truth. Seven years of married life, instead of bringing husband and wife that perfect mutual understanding which should be the fruit of long companionship, had only served to set them very far apart. Looking back down the long vista of those years it seemed to Leslie as though they had brought her nothing but bitter disappointment, day by day, month by month, crushing out the ideals which had been hers when she had stood side by side with Bruce before God's altar and taken the vows which bound them together for all time.

"For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness

and health . . ." To Leslie, at eighteen, the simple words, embodying all that the most perfect companionship should mean, had held her whole vision of wifehood. She had been uplifted by enthusiastic, girlish dreams of being her husband's best and closest comrade, of sharing with him everything that came, good and bad alike. But with marriage these dreams had been shattered. There had been no bad fortune to share. From the first Bruce's luck had been phenomenal, and, as the years passed on, his life in the City, the world of stocks and shares, seemed to absorb him more and more completely. Moreover, he appeared to regard it as a foregone conclusion that his wife should take no interest in such matters. At first, she had tentatively tried to draw him into telling her about his business, but he only laughed her inquiries aside, as though she were a child.

"My dear, don't bother your pretty little head with the very dull details of how money is made. If you concern yourself with the spending of it, that's all I shall ever ask of you."

And that was all he ever had asked. As far as the graver issues of life were concerned, she was completely shut out of his confidence. Leslie realised this only too clearly, and resented it with the whole strength of her nature. Debarred from taking any real and definite interest in her husband's affairs, she very naturally formed interests and friendships of her own in which Bruce had no share, and gradually husband and wife had drifted apart in all the deeper essentials of life. The mere tie of Daimer's primitively fierce passion for her was not sufficient to hold a woman who craved companionship and understanding and an outlet for her energies. And, as almost inevitably happens when a woman misses what she needs in the man she calls husband, Leslie instinctively sought for it elsewhere, finding it eventually in the person of Rex Melville, a rising young artist whom Daimer had commissioned to paint his wife's portrait.

During the course of the sittings for the portrait, which

had extended over some considerable time, a friendship had grown up between them which, unrecognised by either, was rapidly deepening into something more dangerous and demanding. In Melville, Leslie found all that she had missed in Bruce—a peculiar tenderness of understanding, a sympathy, and withal, a boyish gaiety of spirit that appealed both to her youth and to her womanhood. Outsiders, who usually see most of the game, were already remarking upon the friendship existing between the millionaire's wife and Rex Melville. They had been seen together too much not to have provoked comment—at theatres, at concerts, and at dances whither Daimer had been too busy to escort his wife—and now it only remained for some enlightening flash to reveal their mutual danger to the two people most concerned.

It came on the night of the Porthamores' crush. Wearied with the usual banalities of social intercourse, Leslie turned to find Melville standing beside her. A new light sprang into her face, momentarily chasing away the shadows which had lain there.

"You?" she stammered. "I never expected to see you here this evening. I'd no idea you knew the Porthamores."

He smiled.

"I didn't—until to-night. I came here, with a cousin of theirs, especially to meet old Porthamore. He wants me to paint his daughter's portrait, it seems."

A brief flash of amusement leaped into Leslie's eyes as she recalled the podgy features of the proposed sitter.

"Have you seen her?" she whispered laughingly.

Melville's mouth twisted with a wry humour.

"I have. But painters—like beggars—can't be choosers, worse luck! Only, confound it, the plainer people are, the more they appear to wish to have their features reproduced on canvas!"

Leslie nodded, but the brief smile faded swiftly from her face and once more the tired lines reappeared at each side of her mouth—lines which had no business on the face of youth.

Melville observed the change with his usual quick perception.

"You look awfully tired," he said solicitously. "Come out on to the balcony for a breath of air. These rooms"—glancing round him with a look of irritation—"are abominably stuffy."

Her head was throbbing, and she rose gladly and followed him into the dimness of the sheltered balcony, where a swaying Chinese lantern shed a faint, elusive luminance. From below came the occasional rumble of a passing cart or the whir of a taxi—near, sharply-defined sounds superimposed upon the blurred murmur of the distant traffic. Leslie leaned her hot forehead against the cool stone of a pillar with a caught-back sigh of relief.

"What is it?" Melville spoke abruptly. "What's wrong, Leslie? You look as if—as if——" He paused, hesitating.

"Yes? As if?" she parried lightly. Then, suddenly dropping her guard: "Ah, Rex, it's nothing new. It's only the old tale. Why Bruce married me, I can't think! We're as far apart as the two poles. And yet—yes, I do know"—with sudden bitterness. "I'm a good advertisement of his wealth—a pretty peg to hang his jewels on. Look!" She flung out her arm, the new sapphire bracelet gleaming sombrely against its whiteness. "One more link in the chain that binds me. Oh! Sometimes—sometimes I feel as if I can't bear it any longer!"

"Then don't bear it!" The words broke from Melville with a sudden impulse stronger than he could restrain. His arm closed swiftly round her. "Break the chain—and come away with me. Let me teach you what love really means—make you happy. Leslie, belovedest, I can't bear it any longer, either. I can't bear your sad little face—your dear eyes always asking, asking for something that Bruce Daimer can never give you. Come—come away with me, and I swear you shall forget all this. Leslie——"

"Oh, stop!" For a moment she had let him run on, powerless to stem the torrent of his words. But now, with a

desperate gesture, she drew back. "Oh, my dear, stop! Don't ask me, don't tempt me any more. Or I shall say 'yes'—and go with you, Rex. And I mustn't. You don't know—all. You don't know why I married Bruce——"

"God knows I don't!" he muttered. "It—it was inconceivable. Madness!"

"Yes, madness," she assented.

"Then leave him——" he urged.

"No. I can't. I'm not free. It—it was almost a bargain. My father was in difficulties—in debt. And Bruce helped him, set him on his feet again. Later, he asked me to marry him, and I couldn't—how could I?—refuse. We owed him everything. But—but I thought he cared—*really* cared. And I was so grateful to him that I think I couldn't have helped loving him if I had meant anything to him at all. But, afterwards——" She broke off, hiding her face in her hands, while a long-drawn, choking sob shook her slender frame. Presently she recovered her composure a little. "So you see, Rex, I must stay—as long as I can, as long as it's bearable."

"And if—if ever it gets unbearable?" he said. "Then, Leslie, you'll come?"

She looked at him rather sadly.

"Ah, Rex, perhaps—by then—you won't want me any longer."

"I shall always want you," he returned simply. "I shall always be waiting for you."

Very gently and tenderly he took her in his arms and kissed her. For the moment infinite pity for the brave, tired soul of her had robbed his love of all passion. And it was just then that a man's figure darkened the doorway, and Leslie, drawing herself swiftly from Melville's arms, discerned her husband's face through the dusky half-light shed by the gaily-painted Chinese lantern—a face convulsed with rage, eyes blazing, lips drawn back in a snarl that was almost animal.

"And now"—Daimer spoke in a voice shaken by uncontrollable anger—"you'll come home—with me."

2

As long as she lived Leslie would never forget all that followed her husband's appearance on the Porthamores' balcony. Oddly enough, he had contrived to restrain his fury at the moment. He had created no scene, for which she was illimitably thankful, although in her bitterness of soul she attributed this fact purely to his desire not to offend a "useful" acquaintance like Lord Porthamore. But when they were once more within the four walls of their own home, Bruce had given his temper free rein. He had not tried to understand, he had refused even to listen to her, and when at last she had flung at him the bitter challenge that he had never cared, that he had bought her with the money with which he had squared her father's debts, he had let it stand at that.

"Say I bought you, then, if you choose," he had told her. "If so, you're doubly mine, and I'll let you go to no other man." He caught her roughly by the arms. "You'll keep your side of the bargain, Leslie. Do you understand?"

She had understood well enough, and the bruises which stained her white flesh served to remind her for days to come of the utter futility of struggling against Bruce Daimer—either physically or spiritually. Outwardly, therefore, she yielded, and during the weeks which followed it seemed as though matters had settled down once more into their usual routine. At first, Daimer had been vigilantly watchful, reluctant to leave his wife alone, as though he still feared she might defy him, but day after day the apathetic submission of her manner served to reassure him, and finally he seemed to forget the entire episode.

But Leslie did not forget. That final terrible quarrel with her husband seemed to her to have broken the last thread of

loyalty she owed him, to have utterly and completely destroyed even the semblance of the love which, when he had first married her, she had had for him. And from the moment when he had practically acknowledged that their marriage had been nothing but a bargain—his wealth against her beauty—her decision to leave him, to accept what Melville offered her, was taken, and she only waited for an opportunity. It came with the gradual relaxation of Daimer's vigilance. An urgent business matter demanded his presence in Paris, and, apparently assured of her complete submission to his will, he had responded to the summons, leaving her alone at home for the first time since the night of the Porthamores' reception, and had motored down to Dover to catch the cross-Channel boat.

"I shall always be waiting for you!" Melville had said. And now the waiting time was over.

Leslie stood beside the slender amount of baggage that she proposed to take with her—a small suit-case that could be carried in the hand, containing just a few necessaries. She wanted none of the things which had been Daimer's gifts. Furs and costly gowns—they were all hanging in their accustomed places, and of her jewellery she had made a package and left it, addressed to her husband, upon the desk in his study. Now she stood waiting—waiting for Melville to come and take her away. It was midday. Outside, the sun beat warmly down on to the pavement. They had chosen this hour because the servants would be at luncheon, and Leslie could thus slip out of the house unnoticed. She glanced down at her watch. Everything was ready. She was impatient to be gone.

Presently, from below came the soft whirr of a closed car. She peered through the slats of the lowered blind and watched it draw smoothly to a standstill by the kerb outside the house. Then, picking up her suit-case, she went softly downstairs, crossed the hall, and threw open the house door. The thought flashed through her mind that she knew now how a caged bird

must feel when some one opens the door of its cage and sets it free. . . .

. . . . . .

"What—what is it?"

Leslie drew sharply back. A man was standing on the doorstep—not Melville, but a stranger—and she was conscious of a confused blur of figures beside the open door of the car. They were lifting some one out—some one who lay prone on a stretcher.

"What is it?" she repeated more sharply.

The man standing on the threshold stepped forward and lifted his hat.

"Madam, I'm sorry to inform you that there has been a bad accident——" he began.

To Leslie the regretfully worded speech seemed interminable—she thought the dry, precise voice would never finish what it had to say. Actually, hardly a moment must have elapsed, for, as a small procession of four figures carrying a stretcher passed her and entered the house, she knew exactly what they bore—the senseless body of her husband. There had been an accident on the Dover road. His car had collided with another and he was seriously injured.

Leslie looked stupidly at the suit-case in her hand. It seemed to mock her with its futility. It signified going away—escape. And there could never be any going away, now. The suit-case had no longer the slightest meaning. Hardly conscious of what she was doing, she laid it down on a nearby chair, and, turning, followed the small, terrible procession up the stairs.

3

Leslie's clear, tranquil voice ceased and she let the newspaper from which she had been reading aloud slide down on to her knee.

"I can't see to read any more, Bruce," she said. "Wait a moment, and I will switch on the lights."

"No, don't." He stretched out a restraining hand. "Let's sit and talk by the firelight."

She smiled rather wistfully. Light or dark, it was all one to Bruce Daimer now. The injuries he had suffered in the motor accident had been more serious than even the doctors had at first supposed. A couple of smashed ribs and a broken collar-bone were among the least of them. The worst injury had been to his head, and had affected his eyes. It was long before the bandages could be removed, and before that time came a great oculist had given it as his verdict that it would be impossible to save the patient's sight.

After the first wild recoil, terrible in its intensity, of a man cut off in his prime from all that signified life, Daimer had faced the blow with a pluck that was amazing. To Leslie, overwhelmed by the tragedy of the affair, his fine courage seemed to bring back the lover of her girlhood—the man who, at a moment when it had seemed as though her father's mismanagement of his affairs must engulf the whole family in misery, had coolly and competently taken the helm and saved the situation. And with that revival of earlier memories came a quiet determination to stand by the man whom fate had stricken in so terrible a manner. She could never leave him now. There was no longer any question of carrying out a bargain, paying back a debt. There remained only his great need of her. And to that need Leslie answered as the eternal woman always will answer to the needs of her men-folk.

It was over two months now since Bruce had been allowed downstairs—four since the day of the accident itself—and despite the long strain of his illness, and the subsequent strangeness of the life to which she had had to accustom herself, Leslie had extracted from it a new, quiet happiness. The mere fact of Bruce's absolute dependence on her had called forth all that was best and finest in her, and the bitter-

ness which she had long felt towards him had been wiped out by the infinite pity which his misfortune awakened in her.

Save for a deep scar across the cheek-bone, his face showed little trace of the accident which had robbed him of his sight. Sometimes, looking into the keen, hazel eyes, so utterly unaltered, it seemed to her almost impossible of belief that they could not see. And then some awkward, fumbling movement of arm or hand, a lurching stumble against chair or foot-stool, served to bring vividly before her the full realisation of the terrible truth. Even now, as he suggested talking by the firelight, his eyes seemed to seek her own just as any other man's might. Yet they missed meeting them.

"Leslie"—Bruce spoke with a slight effort. "You've had a pretty rotten time since my accident. I wish you'd go out more—take up your usual life again."

"And leave you?" she said, smiling.

He nodded.

"Yes. And leave me sometimes. I can find my way about the rooms alone now—if I go carefully. And you can't be tied to a blind man's side day in, day out," he wound up irritably.

"I don't mind it——" she was beginning, when he interrupted abruptly.

"That's nonsense. You're only trying to deceive yourself and me when you talk like that. You've been inexpressibly good to me—but there's a limit, and I'm not going to take everything you choose to give."

"I—owed you a good deal, Bruce," she said quietly.

He sprang to his feet with a sudden impulsive movement that frightened her lest, not seeing, he should hurt himself against some piece of furniture, and involuntarily she jumped up, too, and laid a quick, guiding hand on his arm. The next moment she felt it caught and held determinedly.

"Haven't you forgotten that, yet—what I said about your

keeping your part of the bargain?" he demanded bitterly. "God knows I've wished it unsaid a hundred times. I've sometimes felt that—all your goodness to me—has only been a part of the bargain!"

She let her hand remain in his.

"When I said I owed you a good deal, I was thinking of something quite different," she answered quietly.

"What, then?"

"Must I tell you?"

"I think so. Leslie"—his arm slipped round her shoulders and the sightless eyes appeared to search her face—"Leslie, these last few months seem to have brought us closer together—back to where we started from seven years ago. Don't let anything stand between us—again."

"This will, I'm afraid," she replied wistfully. She, too, felt as though the years had rolled back, and now, if she told Bruce the truth he asked of her, perhaps the new understanding which had grown up imperceptibly betwixt them since his accident, and the quiet happiness she had been learning to know and value, would be at an end. She hesitated for a moment. Then at last she spoke.

"Bruce, I don't suppose you'll forgive me—I don't suppose you'll ever quite understand what drove me into it. But, if our happiness is to last, to be worth anything, it mustn't be founded on a sham. You say I've been 'good to you!' Oh, my dear, far from being good to you, I was once on the point of leaving you altogether——"

She felt the arm about her shoulders jerk.

"For—Melville?"

She bent her head. "Yes. For Rex."

"And what stopped you?" he said quickly. "Why didn't you go?"

She tried to speak, but her voice failed her and she stood looking at him with eyes blurred by sudden tears.

"Was it—was it my accident?" he asked, with a strange gentleness.

She turned and took a few restless paces away from him, then stood staring blindly out of the window. She hated hurting him as she knew her answer must hurt.

"Yes." The admission seemed torn from her.

"Then—thank God for it!" he said quietly. "If it was that which has brought us together again, then it has been worth it—a thousand times over, and I'll never grudge one minute of the bad time I went through."

She did not move from where she stood—only gazed at him with eyes in which the dawn of a great happiness struggled with incredulity.

"Do you mean—did *you* care, then, too—all the time?"

"Did I care?"—passionately. "Care? Didn't you *know* I cared?"

"You never let me see it!"

A look of utter astonishment overspread his face.

"I did everything in my power to show you. Who else did I work to make a fortune for? Didn't I give you everything a man *could* give the woman he worshipped—cars, dresses, jewels! Was any slightest wish of yours ever left ungratified?"

While he spoke the past unrolled itself before her eyes—clear to read like some hitherto incomprehensible code of which she had suddenly been given the key.

"Yes," she said swiftly. "You gave me everything, Bruce—*except your confidence.* You treated me like a doll—like a child to be petted and spoiled and scolded as the mood took you. Never as a wife. You kept me outside all the big, real things in your life—never let me share your worries and anxieties. You gave me candy and ice-cream, when I was starving for bread. But when you lost your sight, then you *needed* me—not as a woman to be petted, but as the woman who could be your mate—your comrade——" She broke off, shaken with the intensity of her own emotion.

"Needed you?" he said slowly. "I've always needed you. There's never been a moment when I haven't needed you—

only apparently I've been as big a fool as other men and gone the wrong way about to make it clear. But that's over now." Before she knew what he was about to do, he strode swiftly towards her. She uttered a sharp cry of warning, fearful lest he should stumble against a chair that stood between them. But he did not pause. Instead, he stretched out his hand and, grasping the chair, twisted it out of his path.

"Bruce!" She stepped back in amazement. "You saw—you *saw* that chair! You must have seen it!"

"Saw it? Of course I saw it! Just as I see you, too, beautifullest."

"But—but—the doctors—your blindness!" she stammered wildly. She felt as though everything were reeling round her.

He laughed triumphantly.

"The doctors found out what was wrong—and put it right—weeks ago."

"Weeks ago? Then why—why did you let me go on believing you were blind?"

He took her in his arms.

"Because I found that my blindness—my utter dependence on you—was bringing me back the wife I'd lost. And so I pretended—went on letting you believe I was blind until I was sure—*sure* that no misunderstanding could ever set us apart again. It's been devilish hard—playing a part, keeping from you the glorious truth that I could see, letting you do things for me when I was aching to do things for you. But it's been worth it, because it's given me my comrade-wife. Worth it to me, at least." He paused. "And for you, Leslie? Has it been worth it, too?"

Her eyes met his—seeing eyes looking gladly into other eyes that saw.

"You know it has," she answered. "Comrades, Bruce—always."

CHAPTER XIII

THE REAL THING

1

A SEA like a vast blue lake, crystal-smooth in the windless calm of the afternoon and flecked here and there with the brown or white sail of a fishing-smack. Overhead, the deep sapphire-blue sky of mid-summer, tremulous with a myriad infinitesimal points of light and paling into a pearly mist on the edge of the far horizon. All around, a warm and drowsy silence, unbroken by man or beast.

Suddenly, against the shimmering haze of pearl and amber, a black speck showed, poised like a bird betwixt the sky and sea. Then the speck grew bigger, widened wing-like, and the still air pulsated to a distant humming.

Soon—in an incredibly short time it seemed—outspread, motionless wings glinted silver in the sunlight, the humming deepened to the rhythmic beat of an engine, and an aeroplane swept into view, skimming towards the green-crowned cliffs that hemmed the shore.

Presently she began to plane down, dropping on a long, sloping line as a bird may drop, and at last she landed with unerring precision on the short-cropped grass of the downs, ran a few yards, and came to rest.

The pilot and his passenger—a woman—scrambled out, and the latter hastened to divest herself of the heavy coat that enveloped her, emerging from it slim and supple, and graceful as a young birch. Then she pulled off the close-fitting cap she was wearing, and the sun glinted delightedly on a mass of chestnut hair, touching its loosened strands to gold.

"Oh! It was glorious!" she exclaimed ecstatically. "Thank you—*thank you,* Carden!"

The man stared down at the exquisite face lifted to his. Her eyes were as darkly blue as the sapphire of the sky above, and the swift rush through the air had whipped her cheeks to a rosy flush.

"Glad you liked it," he said gruffly, adding with a faint smile: "It was worth the price, then?"

"The—the price?" she stammered, the flush deepening in her cheeks.

"Yes—the kiss that you promised me."

"Oh!" The blue eyes laughed at him provocatively. "You didn't expect me to pay, did you?"

The man's face hardened. It was not a handsome face, but strong and clean-cut, with the eager, unflinching, wary eyes of those whose safety depends upon the keenness of their vision. For the rest, there were grim lines about his mouth, born of a past that held neither faith nor love, but only disillusionment.

"It was the bargain between us," he said steadily. "Have you forgotten?"

She tapped her foot impatiently on the ground. Of course she hadn't forgotten! She had been wild to go flying, coaxing and imploring Carden Burke to take her. And he, because this was a new machine he was testing, had at first refused. Then she had put forth all her charm—and the charm of Celia Rendall when she chose to exert it was a source of dire peril to any mere male within the radius of its influence.

"Very well," she had retorted. "If you won't take me, some one else will. And I swear I'll kiss the first man who does!"

"Is that a bargain?" Burke had asked quickly.

She nodded defiance, and he had clinched the matter then and there.

"Done!" he said. "I'll take you."

Celia Rendall was twenty-three, and had flirted her way successfully through the last six years of her life without a check, making promises and breaking them, and taking hearts and breaking them, too, with the avid, irresponsible curiosity of a child dissecting a fly, and quite oblivious of the cruelty involved.

She was essentially a modern product, and thanks to a society mother whose thoughts were bounded by auction and clothes, and to a father of bachelor tastes, whose primary object in life, apparently, was to avoid his parental and marital obligations, she had been early inoculated with the easy cynicism of the times.

She was not really intentionally ruthless. It was merely that she chanced to be an exceptionally pretty woman, at whose feet innumerable hearts had been cast, while her own still remained her exclusive property. Splendidly immune, and utterly ignorant of the realities, she regarded marriage as a cage, and the lovemaking that preceded it as the gilding designed to conceal the bars, whilst the desire to attract was as inborn in her as is the hunting instinct of a tiger.

Up till now, a torrent of hot words, of reproaches nonchalantly swept aside, had constituted the only consequence of her airy incursions into that region where hearts are trumps. But Celia had hitherto been dealing with men of a totally different calibre from the grim-looking, square-jawed individual who faced her now, demanding the fulfilment of her lightly uttered promise.

"Of course I've not forgotten," she acknowledged smilingly. "But I only said I'd kiss you in order to get my own way! I never meant to do it."

"Well, I mean you to, anyway," replied Burke bluntly. "A bargain's a bargain."

She laughed lightly.

"My dear man, a woman's promises are never made to be kept! They're like cream—they spoil with keeping."

He drew a step nearer to her.

"I allow no one—neither man nor woman—to play fast and loose with me," he said, and there was something ominous in the quiet of his voice. "Celia, are you going to keep your promise?"

"Why, no," she returned. "Of course I'm not. Don't be so absurd."

"Then, by God, I'll make you!" he exclaimed savagely.

He had come close to her side, and now, with a sudden, swift movement, he caught her in his arms and held her, his eyes searching her face.

For a moment they stared at each other—the grey, hawk-like eyes, and the half-frightened blue ones—the next, he had kissed her fiercely, exultantly, crushing the red, curved lips beneath his own.

"Celia, I love you—love you! When will you marry me?" The words leaped from him, dominating, demanding; no question of will or will not, but only of time—how soon?

Celia, released from his iron grip, shrank away from him apprehensively. Then, regaining her poise by a supreme effort, she retorted with forced gaiety:

"Marry you? Never, my dear Carden! You've taken your payment whether I would or no—that's more than most men have done, by the way! Be thankful for small mercies."

But he swept her levity aside. He, himself, was desperately in earnest.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed hotly. "You're not going to pretend you didn't know I loved you—didn't know I meant to marry you? Why, what do you suppose we've been leading up to all these months?"

"Leading up to?" she queried with a delicate hesitation. "I don't think I understand you."

"What has this summer meant to you, Celia? Hasn't it meant love and——"

"The summer has meant nothing at all to me—no more than any other summer," she interrupted hastily. "And I don't think the word love has ever been mentioned."

He stared at her unbelievingly.

"Meant nothing to you? I don't believe it! Haven't we played and talked and dreamed together? Oh, I know the word love has never been mentioned, but you knew as well as I did where we were drifting."

She faced him coolly.

"I really don't know what *you* were doing, Mr. Burke. That's your own affair. But *I* wasn't drifting—anywhere!"

Her smiling indifference seemed at last to shake his confidence. His face changed a little; doubt leaped suddenly into his eyes.

"It's a lie!" he muttered, his voice vibrating oddly. "A lie! No woman could—no woman——" He broke off abruptly. Then, coming quite close to her, he put his hand beneath her chin and tilted her face up to his, staring down at it.

"Answer me!" he said violently. "Have you only been fooling me all these months?"

Celia wrenched herself away from him.

"You've been fooling yourself, I think," she said, "if you imagined that I was in love with you."

There was a long silence. Then—

"And I—I thought you more angel than woman! I worshipped you—I would have given the whole world for the right to shield you, sacrificed anything to save you from a moment's pain, spent myself to the uttermost in serving you!"

She listened to him, and a light, ironical smile curved her mouth.

"Oh, no," she said at last, shaking her head. "That's only what you think you'd do. It's a very pretty picture—but only a picture, after all. Love, to a man like you, means conquest, possession, getting what he wants at any price. It's only to women that love means service and sacrifice. And as I never had any tendency towards self-sacrifice—I

keep out of love! It's much safer—and makes life more amusing."

The cool, calculated cynicism of her words struck him like a blow. And the substratum of truth they contained stung him to a very fury of resentment.

"And you call yourself a woman!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "A woman with those sentiments! Faugh!"

She laughed amusedly.

"Oh, Mr. Burke, believe me, the days are gone of the trusting, clinging little fool, with pink sugar icing sentiments, who was content to make a burnt offering of herself on the nearest male altar."

"I believe you," he replied grimly. And, turning on his heel, he retraced his steps to his machine and busied himself re-starting the engine, while Celia made her way homewards alone across the downs.

2

Just where the broad slope of the downs abutted on to the dusty white highroad, Celia encountered a young man—a big, broad-shouldered young man, with a good-humoured, sunburnt face and a pair of startlingly blue eyes.

She became alive to this latter fact with rather unnerving suddenness by finding the said eyes fixed upon the top of her head in an undisguised stare. Instinctively she put her hand up, only to be reminded that in discarding the close-fitting cap she had been wearing whilst flying she had left herself minus headgear of any sort or description.

"I beg your pardon!" exclaimed the young man impulsively, interpreting her gesture.

"What for?" she asked non-committally.

"For staring like that."

"I don't belong to the No-Hat-Brigade," volunteered Celia. "Though I'll admit it looks like it."

"You ought to," said the young man earnestly, his eyes

resting once more on the coronal of chestnut braids, gleaming like burnished copper in the sunlight. "It's—it's so perfectly glorious!"

A faint smile curved Celia's lips.

"Thank you," she answered, and then went on her way down the road, while the young man stood aside, bare-headed, for her to pass.

Oddly enough, the memory of the brief encounter—and of those surprisingly blue eyes—haunted her continuously. The recollection was accompanied, too, by a curious little thrill which Celia never remembered having experienced before. She was also conscious of an inexplicable wish that there might be a repetition of the meeting.

There was—but in the more conventional surroundings supplied by a little dinner at the house of a mutual friend, when the blue-eyed young man resolved himself into one Jim Laurence, the nephew and heir of old Sir James Laurence, the owner of half the county and also of large sums invested in securities that justified the name. In these socialistic days, so many securities don't.

Jim was a very direct young man. If he wanted a thing, he always forged straight ahead in the endeavour to obtain it, and having decided, the very first moment he set eyes on her, that he wanted Celia, and was likely to want her still more as years went on, he started in at once to make her the sharer of his views.

Celia, accustomed to toy with hearts as an epicure with a new dish, suddenly found herself swept onward at a headlong pace that admitted of none of the sham little wiles and coquetries that are the current coin of the flirt—breathlessly hurried into a vibrant reality, wherein a man gave her the whole of his big, sane love and insistently claimed hers in return.

And he obtained it. Which goes to support the theory that a citadel which has resisted many a carefully planned siege may sometimes be taken by storm.

Jim simply didn't give Celia time to flirt with him. He loved her and he let her know it, and when she had recourse to the old-established strategy of her kind and attempted to trifle with the situation in a dilettante kind of manner, he broke all the rules of the game and declined to be trifled with.

He stood up before her, very tall and straight and with very shining blue eyes, and said:

"Look here, darling. You know I love you, and you either love me in return or you don't. I hope you do. In which case I'll stay here and we'll get married just as soon as we possibly can. But if you *don't,* why then, say so, and I'll go away right now. It's up to you to tell me which I'm to do."

And Celia, realising that he meant every word he said, told him to stay, and the engagement became an accomplished fact.

The news spread quickly in the neighbourhood, finding its way at last to the little cottage where Carden Burke had established himself, and near which he had built a huge shed for the housing of his aeroplane and a workshop in which to make his experiments. Whereupon he engineered a chance meeting with her.

"So you haven't been able to keep out of love, after all," he remarked sullenly. "I understood you considered that marriage was a mistake?"

"I believe it depends a great deal upon the man one marries," replied Celia out of her newly-acquired wisdom.

"I see. And I'm—the other man, I suppose?"

She regarded him consideringly.

"Yes, I think you are," she agreed.

3

"We'll spend our honeymoon on Laurence Island," announced Jim, when the wedding-day had taken to itself a date. "Don't you think it would be a topping idea, darling?"

Laurence Island was an outlying portion of Sir James's property—a few acres of land which the encroaching sea, year by year eating into the coast, had so far failed to conquer. Smiling and triumphant, this little chip of the mainland held its own—a rock-bound oasis of verdant green in the midst of the blue water.

"There's a jolly little wooden shanty there," pursued Jim, "where we could have our quarters, and we could bathe and boat and fish and enjoy ourselves without any Paul Pry nosing round to spoil the fun. People are so dashed interested in honeymooners."

"What about food?" demanded Celia practically.

"Oh, one of the boats could bring over provisions every day or two. And we'd hire a woman to cook for us."

"That might be as well," admitted Celia, "seeing that I don't think I could even boil an egg with any certainty of the thing being a success."

"Lord! How badly they bring you girls up nowadays!" murmured Jim fondly. "Well, I'll slip across to the island to-morrow and overhaul our quarters—find out what we shall need and so on."

It was a grey morning when Jim set sail for the island. Banks of sullen-looking cloud had massed themselves low down on the horizon, and an angry spume tufted the broken surface of the sea.

"Is it safe?" Celia asked a little nervously.

"Safe?"

Jim's ringing, boyish laugh answered the question more effectively than a dozen reiterated assurances, and as Celia watched from the shore the little craft dance its way over the grey, crested waves, the vague apprehension she had experienced ceased to trouble her.

But her peace of mind was soon snatched from her, for early in the afternoon the threatened storm broke with appalling suddenness.

Heavy clouds stretched out long arms and gathered the

whole sky into their embrace; the wind caught up the sea into huge mountains of slate-coloured water and flung them down again with a swirl of yellow foam and splintered spray, while the blinding rain drove like some ghostly army before the gale.

Celia, drenched to the skin, stood on the beach amid a little group of keen-eyed fishermen, scanning the grey waste of water for the sight of a sail.

But no sail showed. Only, where Laurence Island lay, a shroud of spray from the breakers beating against its rock-strewn coast hung continuously in the air.

"Don't 'ee worry, missie," said one of the fishermen kindly. "Young master'll not be for leaving the island to-day. He'll make himself snug in yon cabin what's there."

"But he's got no food with him," cried Celia. "He'll be faint with hunger before morning."

"Aye, mebbe he will. But 'tis better to be hungry than dead," replied the old man sagely. And during the long hours of desperate suspense that came after, those words rang mockingly in Celia's ears: "'Tis better to be hungry than dead."

Throughout the following night and morning the storm raged unabated, and in the afternoon some wreckage was cast up on to the shore—broken, drifting pieces of something that the fishermen identified as a boat, the boat in which Jim had set sail the previous day.

Celia besought the men to take out the life-boat and try and make the island, but they only shook their heads with the quiet, submissive fatalism of those that go down to the sea in ships.

"She couldn't live in such a sea, miss. She'd be swamped inside ten minutes."

No entreaties, no offer of reward, could induce them to risk it. They knew the utter futility of such an effort, and Celia could have killed them for what appeared to her their stubborn apathy. Amongst themselves they accounted Jim

as already lying far below the surging tumult of grey waters, and as one of them bluntly told her:

"'Tis no good risking the living to save the dead."

"But he's *not* dead!" persisted Celia. "He's on the island —I'm sure of it! And if you don't get him off he may die from hunger and thirst. You said yourselves that he'd never attempt to leave the island in this storm!"

"There's the wreckage," they reminded her. "They spars was from the *Mary Anne* sure enough. And if so be you're right, miss, and he's still safe on the island, he must bide there a bit. No boat could land there while the seas be running mountains high."

In those hours of racking anxiety, with the stark fear of death standing at her elbow, Celia learned to know the meaning of love as her butterfly soul had never before conceived it. She realised that Jim, and Jim's safety, mattered to her more than anything in the whole world. And she was powerless to secure it!

But was she? All at once it came into her mind that there was one man who might yet help her—Carden Burke, the flying man! He alone could land on the island far out of reach of those terrific breakers that barred away the lifeboat.

The fact that she would have to swallow her pride and ask a favour of the very man whom she had dismissed with contemptuous indifference so short a time ago did not trouble her, for to this new Celia, up against the big realities of love and death, pride had become a very little thing.

Half an hour later, Carden Burke, lazily smoking in front of the log fire he had lit to keep out the cold and damp of the afternoon, opened the door of his cottage in answer to a hurried knocking. Outside stood a woman, her wet clothes clinging limply to her slender limbs, her chestnut hair, loosened by the wind, whipping her white face.

"Miss Rendall—Celia!" he exclaimed, involuntarily stepping back a pace.

She crossed the threshold swiftly.

"Yes. I want your help."

In a few words she had told him how matters stood, while he listened, pipe in hand.

"And now, will you go?" Then, as he made no answer: "Oh, my God! Don't hesitate! You're the only man who can save him—the only man!"

"I'm afraid the fishermen may be right, and that it's too late to save him," he said slowly.

"But there's just a chance—a chance!" she cried imploringly. "He may be there—on the island—hurt——" She broke off and covered her face with her hands, shuddering.

"Do you love him—like that?" he asked jealously.

She dropped her hands and met his insistent gaze.

"Yes," she said simply.

Burke strode across to the window and looked out.

"It's dirty weather," he muttered. "It would be taking a big risk."

She peered at him.

"You're—you're afraid!" she cried scornfully.

"No, I'm not," he replied, turning round from the window. "I'm merely wondering if it's worth it."

"Worth it?"—in puzzled tones.

"Yes. You see, *I* want you myself—and you're asking me to go to the rescue of the other fellow. Why should I?"

"Why should you? Why should you?" she repeated. "Oh, don't you understand? It's his *life*—Jim's life!"

"And does his life mean so much to you?"

She faced him steadily.

"More than anything else in the world," she answered quietly.

He was silent a moment. Then he turned to her with an odd smile on his dark, grim-featured face.

"Look here," he said. "I'll make a bargain with you. You tried to break your first bargain with me, but you'd have to keep this one. I'll go to the island—if you'll promise

to marry me, the promise to hold good whether I find Laurence there or not."

For a little space she stared at him uncomprehendingly. Then a look of horrified understanding dawned in her eyes, and she backed slowly away from him, step by step, till she stood leaning against the wall, her hands stretched out on either side of her, pressed hard against its surface.

"Oh! You—you brute!" she whispered hoarsely.

Burke regarded her dispassionately.

"I may be," he said coolly. "But I know what I want, and, like other men, I try to get it. Those are my terms; take 'em or leave 'em."

An illimitable silence followed. It seemed to Celia as though a gulf had opened suddenly at her feet—a bitter gulf which must swallow all that her world might hold of happiness.

Her eyes, desperate and incredulous with horror, sought Burke's face, but there was no relenting in the stubborn set of his close-lipped mouth.

At last she spoke. The words came haltingly from her dry throat.

"Very well. I'll—I'll marry you. But you must go at once. Do you hear—*at once?*"

Burke nodded.

"I'll run the machine out now," he said. And opening the door, he strode out into the wind and rain and across the field to the big shed where his aeroplane was housed.

4

Jim, white-faced and shaken, lay on his bed with one of his legs in splints and a dark bruise on his forehead.

When, after much difficulty, due to the high wind, Carden Burke had at last succeeded in landing on the island, it had been to find Jim stretched on the floor of the shanty with a

broken leg to his credit. He had rashly made an attempt to leave the island on the afternoon of the storm, he told Burke, but his boat had been dashed to pieces against the rocks, whilst he himself had been carried up on to the shore by the waves and flung down, bruised and unconscious.

When he returned to his senses he had dragged himself painfully, an inch at a time, to the little log house, and there he had lain, helpless and lapsing at times into unconsciousness, until Burke had found him.

It had been a difficult job, transferring a man with a broken leg to the aeroplane, but somehow the dogged, grim-faced airman had accomplished it, and then had come the swift flight through the waning storm and the landing upon the downs, where Celia, whose belief that Jim would be found on the island had never faltered, was waiting with a doctor and a motor-car in attendance.

And now, two days later, she was standing at the foot of Jim's bed, telling him the cost at which his rescue had been accomplished.

Jim's hands, lying outside the bedsheets, clenched themselves slowly.

"My God!" he muttered. "What a blackguard! What an out-and-out blackguard!"

"Not altogether, Jim," she answered with reluctant justice. "At least, Carden Burke is a brave man. He took big risks—and I suppose he thinks he's earned his pay. No one else would go, remember."

"I'd rather you had let me die than that you had bought my life at such a price."

Celia slipped to her knees beside his bed and laid her cheek against his hand.

"I couldn't, Jim—I couldn't do that, dear."

Presently some one came to tell her that Carden Burke was waiting below to see her.

Every drop of colour drained itself away from her face as

she rose to her feet and, stooping, laid her lips to Jim's.

"Good-bye, dear," she whispered, and then went slowly down the stairs to the room where Burke awaited her.

He was standing with his back to the door as she entered, looking out of the window. He wheeled round at the soft sound of her entrance, but he did not advance to meet her. Instead, he remained where he was, staring at her from beneath frowning brows. There were heavy shadows underneath his eyes; he had the air of a man who has watched through the night rather than slept.

Celia stood still a few paces away from him.

"You've—you've come to claim your bargain," she said a little tremulously. "I'm ready, Carden."

He took a sudden step towards her.

"So you're ready to make your sacrifice, are you?" he said with an odd, twisted smile. "Well, you needn't! The bargain's off."

"Off? What do you mean?"

"I mean that I'm not going to claim it. You're free. I'm only the other man—the odd man out. I know that. I've known it all along, I think, really, though I put up a fight against it." He paused, then added quietly: "You thought it was only to women that love meant service and sacrifice. But love—the real thing—means the same to all of us, I guess."

CHAPTER XIV

AKIN TO LOVE

1

"TONY! At last!"

The exclamation was one of pure delight. The girl who uttered it made a movement as though to raise herself on the couch upon which she lay, then dropped back against her cushions, a brief spasm of pain contracting her young face.

Tony Kyrle's gay blue eyes softened incredibly as he bent over her.

"'At last!' You demanding young person!" he replied, smiling down at the girl. She smiled back happily in answer; she always understood the little friendly teasing note in Tony's voice. "Why, did you want me sooner?" he went on, pulling up a chair and sitting down beside the couch.

"I think I always want you." There was a shade of wistfulness in the answer. "I was afraid you were going down to the lake without coming in to see me."

"Of course not, honeyflower. I expect we shall keep it up down there till midnight or later, by which time all good little girls will be in bed and asleep."

He spoke with a sort of playful camaraderie, as though she were more child than woman. And indeed that was very much how he thought of her. She had been no more than a child when he had first found her, lying unconscious by the roadside, where she had been flung by a restive cob she was riding, and the seven years which had elapsed since then had passed without Tony's quite realising that she had grown into womanhood.

The fall from her horse had been responsible for an injury to the spine, and although the doctors still maintained that recovery was possible, their hopes in this respect had not so far materialised. Meanwhile, Margery Seymour spent her days on a couch, subject to more or less constant pain, and Tony Kyrle's frequent visits were the brightest spots in what was bound to be, at best, a very weary and shadowed young life.

The acquaintance begun through the medium of Margery's misfortune had ripened into a close intimacy. Her parents, still young themselves, had taken an immediate liking to the tall, blue-eyed young man who had driven the child back to her home in his car on the day of the accident, and by this time they both regarded him more or less in the light of a younger brother whose welcome to their house went without saying. During the war he had invariably spent his leave with them, having no home of his own—unless bachelor chambers could be counted as such—and when he won the V.C. Mrs. Seymour had been as glad and proud as his own mother would have been had she lived to know of it.

On the present occasion he had come down to spend Christmas with them, and to-night, taking advantage of the intense frost which had sheeted the lake with ice for more than a week past, the Seymours had organised a skating carnival, to which half the neighbourhood had been bidden.

"Is Mrs. Amery to be there this evening?" asked Margery presently, after making eager inquiries as to the proposed arrangements for the night's festivity.

A fleeting change of expression showed on Tony's face. For a moment his blue eyes darkened till they looked almost black.

"Yes. Marion—your mother told me she was coming," he answered shortly.

"I'm so glad. You always like her, don't you, Tony?" He nodded, and she went on: "I don't see how any one could help liking her. She's so beautiful."

"Yes. She's very beautiful." His voice sounded remote.

"And yet Janet—that's my maid, you know—told me this morning that Mr. Amery is dreadfully unkind to her. They even say"—her voice dropping almost to a whisper—"that he beats her!"

Tony made a sudden jerky movement. Then he said angrily:

"Janet should hold her tongue. She's no business to tell you things like that. I suppose she's been gossiping with one of the Amery Hall servants. Why didn't you shut her up?"

Margery looked half scared at the sudden anger in his voice, and Tony continued indignantly:

"It's horrible to encourage servants' gossip about a woman like Mrs. Amery."

The girl's pretty head dropped. The least hint of disapprobation from Tony's lips was sufficient to bring dismay to her heart. Half child, half woman, his word was her absolute law.

"I didn't mean to—to encourage it," she stammered, the tears very near her eyes. "I—you know I *love* Mrs. Amery!"

"Of course you do!" Tony was filled with quick remorse. "Only, you see, kiddy, if we are Carol's—Mrs. Amery's pals, you and I—we can't let people like Janet discuss her troubles."

Margery nodded soberly.

"Don't tell her to-night—will you, Tony?" she besought him anxiously. "She might be vexed that I didn't stop Janet from talking."

"Tell her?" Tony almost gasped. He couldn't quite imagine any one telling Carol Amery, with her delicate little air of pride and aloofness, that one of the servants had declared her husband beat her! But—and at the mere thought his hands clenched—could it be possible that there was a grain of truth in the report?

Every one was aware that Bruce Amery and his wife

didn't get on too well together. Rumour had it that at times Amery drank heavily, and it was common knowledge that he was a man of uncontrollable temper. Was it possible that in one of his violent rages he had actually laid hands on the frail, exquisite woman who was his wife? Tony felt sick at the thought.

As he walked across the park to the frozen lake, after bidding Margery a somewhat compunctious good night, his very soul rose up in revolt at the idea of Carol subjected to any man's rough handling! It had been bad enough to know that she was tied to a sulky brute like Amery—she had let him see a little into the dark places of her life—but if Margery's tale were true, then matters must soon come to breaking-point.

He strode on rapidly, the crisp film of ice which encrusted each blade of grass and fallen twig crunching with a little protesting whisper beneath his feet. Suddenly, from close at hand, the jovial, inspiriting strains of a band blared forth on the frosty air, and a sharp turn in the path brought the lake into full view. Big bonfires blazed at intervals along its borders, so that the frozen surface was striped alternately with vivid patches of golden light, against which the darting figures of the skaters showed suddenly clear and distinct, and with stretches of gloom, mysterious with chequered moonlight, into which the figures disappeared and were swiftly blurred into vague, misty shadows. Coloured Chinese lanterns, borne on slender bamboo rods by some of the revellers, flecked the scene with unexpected gleams of red and gold and blue, looking like so many multi-coloured fireflies skimming and dancing above the lake.

For a brief space Tony's eager gaze scanned the shifting crowd of figures. Then some unerring instinct took him straight to Carol's side. She was standing by the bank, alone for the moment. On its slender neck, circled by sable fur, her small head seemed to Tony poised like some delicate flower, and when she turned her soft, violet-grey eyes upon

him he felt as though his heart had jumped suddenly into his throat.

Almost without greeting the man and woman clasped hands and slid away together over the black, gleaming ice. They skated in silence—a silence that seemed to link them together, bind them more closely than any words. It was not until they had reached the further end of the lake that she spoke.

"Oh, Tony, it's good to have you back again!"

There was a little breathless catch in her voice, something urgent and appealing, that stirred him to the depths of his soul.

"Have you wanted me? Tell me quick, Carol! Has he been making you miserable again?"

They were standing in deep shadow. A great blaze of light flung across the lake by one of the leaping bonfires seemed to cut them off from the rest of the world, hemming them in together in a little shadowy world of their own where there was no longer any need for pretence and dissimulation. She bent her head.

"Sometimes," she said, "sometimes I think I can't bear it any longer."

Impulsively he laid his hand on her arm and felt her flinch at his touch, drawing her breath sharply as though it hurt her. His face darkened ominously.

"Why did you wince like that?" he demanded quickly.

The silence which answered him was more eloquent than any words. So it was all true—what Margery had told him!

"Carol!" His voice shook. "Carol, is it—has he dared to *hurt* you?"

Still she remained silent, her woman's pride shrinking from the question.

"Tell me," he insisted sternly.

"It's only when—when he's been drinking too much, Tony," she said at last. "He doesn't know what he's doing then. He's always sorry afterwards."

"'Sorry afterwards'! Look here, Carol"—he spoke with a certain grimness—"this has got to end. You'll leave him—leave him and come away with me."

She drew quickly back from him.

"Oh, no, no, Tony! We can't do that!"

"Don't you care enough, then?" swiftly.

"You know I care!" Her voice throbbed. "You know I care! But sometimes I think, Tony, that what you feel for me isn't—love. It's just kindness and—and pity, and the dear, brave feeling that you can't bear to see a woman bullied."

"I can't bear to see *you* bullied! And I won't either. Come with me, Carol. Dearest, let me take you right away. Then, later, when he's set you free, we'll be married, and I swear before heaven I'll make you happy."

His arms went round her, his voice, eager, beseeching, was in her ears, and for a moment she yielded, suffering herself to be drawn into his embrace. It would be so sweet, so unutterably sweet, to be loved and sheltered and cared for by this man whose very touch sent her pulses racing, the sound of whose voice thrilled her from head to foot.

"You will? Carol, say that you will!" he urged imperiously.

With an effort she drew away from him.

"Ah, no! No, Tony. I can't do that. Dear, it must be enough just to see you sometimes—like this. I must *make* it enough. I—I haven't got the right to take any more."

"He's given you the right!" fiercely.

"No, he hasn't. Nothing could really make it right." She laid a light hand on his arm. "Don't ask me any more, Tony. It's too hard—to go on saying no. Please, dear!"

He stooped and brushed her hand with his lips.

"Very well," he said at last in a stifled voice. "But remember, Carol, if ever—whenever—your life gets too much for you, harder than you can bear, now or ten years hence,

I'm always there, waiting for you. One word from you, and I'll take you away—and make you happy, dear."

"I'll remember," she said gravely. "But—I don't think I shall ever say that word, Tony."

"So you're here!" A tall, broad-shouldered figure had skated up to them unnoticed, and they started apart at the sound of the sullen, angry voice. "So you're here, Carol! What the devil do you mean by hiding yourself like this? I told you I'd skate with you, and then, without a word to me, you go off with some one else."

"I waited quite a long time and you didn't come, Bruce," replied Carol. "So when Mr. Kyrle asked me to go round the lake with him, I did."

"Well, I'm here now." Bruce Amery ignored Tony's presence with an insolent deliberation. "So come along."

"I'm skating with Mr. Kyrle now," said Carol quietly. "I'll come with you later."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, my dear," answered her husband jealously. "You're coming with me—*now*. A married woman's place is with her husband. Come on."

He stretched out his hand, but as Carol made no movement to take it, he drew nearer and caught hold of her roughly by the arm. "Do you hear?"

A sudden puff of wind blew the flames of the nearest bonfire towards them, and in the ruddy glare of their light Amery's face showed dark and convulsed with anger. The slightest opposition served to rouse his temper.

"Do you hear?" he repeated, at the same time gripping his wife's arm with a force that crushed the tender flesh excruciatingly.

"Don't! Don't, Bruce!" The cry was wrung from Carol's shaking lips despite herself, and Tony sprang forward.

"Let go, you brute!" he thundered furiously.

The next moment a savage, well-directed blow from Amery sent him reeling backward, and before he could recover his

balance the former had skated away, dragging Carol with him.

2

Four days elapsed without Tony's being able to obtain sight or sound of Carol Amery. It was as though, when her husband dragged her away from him that evening on the ice, a shutter had descended, cutting him off from all communication with her.

By inquiry he had elicited the fact that the Amerys had been seen leaving the lake together. Apparently Bruce had hurried his wife off home without permitting her even to make her farewells to her hostess.

By the end of the fourth day Tony was nearly mad with anxiety. He had wild thoughts of driving over to the Hall in his car and asking to see Mrs. Amery, but maturer reflection bade him refrain. At the best he would almost certainly be refused admittance, and at the worst it was possible that Amery, furious at his temerity in coming to the house, might visit his ill-humour unpleasantly upon his wife. For her sake, Tony dared not risk it.

But at last, on the afternoon of the fourth day, as he was striding savagely homeward from a fruitless journey to the village, whither he had betaken himself in the hope of a chance meeting with Carol, a note was thrust surreptitiously into his hand. The bearer of the note was the Amerys' under-gardener, a pleasant-faced young fellow who, as Tony knew, was devoted to his mistress. Having delivered the missive, he slipped away again into the December dusk without waiting for any answer.

Tony tore open the envelope and, by the flickering light of successive matches, deciphered the faint, pencil-written contents of the letter.

It's no use, Tony, it ran. *I can't bear it any longer. Since the other evening he hasn't allowed me out of his*

sight. But this afternoon he has gone off in the car, to stay with some people he knows, and he will not be back till Christmas morning. Will you come to me?

Tony crushed the letter into his pocket and, swinging round on his heel, made his way swiftly in the direction of Amery Hall.

Carol's eyes were unusually brilliant and there was a nervous tensity in her manner as she greeted him.

"I'm at the end of my tether, Tony," she said, speaking with enforced quiet. "I can't bear any more. If you still want me—I'll come."

He swept her up into his arms.

"If I still want you!" he cried.

The whole matter was very easily arranged. The next day, Christmas Eve, was to be the occasion of a dance given by the Seymours, to which Carol had, of course, been invited, and since Amery did not propose returning till Christmas morning it would be perfectly simple for Tony and Carol to disappear during the course of the dance and to be many miles away before Amery discovered that they had gone.

"I'll have my car waiting," said Tony, "and if, to-morrow, you'll pack just the few things you'll need in a bag I'll stow it away in the car some time during the day. Then, halfway through the dance, we'll slip off. No one will miss us for a little while. If they do, they'll only think"—with a brief smile—"that we're sitting out somewhere together. And you shall have the happiest Christmas Day of your life, Carol—far away from here, at a little country inn I know of."

Her eyes searched his face.

"Tony, am I taking too much from you?" she asked. "Are you sure—sure that you'll never regret?"

"Sure," he said stoutly.

3

"Do go up and look in at Margery for a minute, will you? She's dying to see your frock."

Mrs. Seymour smiled as she gave Carol a little push in the direction of the staircase.

"You've plenty of time," she added reassuringly. "The dancing won't begin yet."

Carol nodded and sped swiftly upstairs to the invalid's room, where a cry of pleasure welcomed her entrance.

"Oh, Mrs. Amery, how darling of you to come up! I told mum to ask if you would."

Margery's eyes sparkled as they rested on the charming chiffony vision in the doorway. She adored pretty clothes on pretty people with all the eager enthusiasm of one who was herself debarred from exploiting the mysteries of dress. There was something almost boyish in her frank, spontaneous admiration.

"Lift me up, Tony, so that I can see her better," she commanded. And Tony, who had been standing in the background, raised her with all the ease of his splendid young strength and the deft skill of long practice. Margery thanked him with a glance, then riveted her eyes on Mrs. Amery.

"Doesn't she look a darling, Tony?"

"Quite a darling," he declared heartily. "But"—with mock indignation—"you've omitted to remark that *I* look a darling! Am I not also arrayed like a lily of the field?"

Margery gave him a small friendly grin as he sat beside her on the couch, supporting her with an arm about her shoulders.

"You're wearing a perfectly good suit—I'll go as far as that," she replied impertinently.

"Ungrateful female! I've a good mind to put you down on your pillows again instead of making a blessed arm-chair

of myself while you pour out sticky compliments for Mrs. Amery's benefit."

Margery tucked herself more comfortably into the curve of his arm and laughed confidently. She had no fear of Tony's carrying out his threat. It was always he who knew just how to lift her without hurting her back, who waited on her hand and foot, and who was able to soothe her when the pain was almost more than she could bear. Often he had sat holding her in his arms for hours at a stretch, so that he was almost too cramped to move when at last sleep mercifully stilled the pain and he was able to lay her down once more on her couch.

"I think Tony spoils you," said Mrs. Amery, laughing gently.

"Yes. When he's away I miss him dreadfully. You'll never have to get married, Tony. I couldn't spare you," she added.

A silence followed the innocent little remark. Carol flushed suddenly and uncomfortably, while an odd, troubled expression leapt into Tony's eyes. His arms seemed to close a little more tightly round the slender girlish figure which they held. An instant later Mrs. Seymour's voice was heard calling upon him to come and help her with some small detail of arrangement downstairs.

Margery's eyes followed him a thought wistfully. Then she smiled up at Carol as the latter seated herself beside the couch.

"We all call upon Tony when we want helping," she said.

Carol was silent. The simple truth of the little speech knocked at her heart.

"He's the most wonderful person in the world, I think," went on Margery, happily. "Ever since my accident he's been down here constantly. Half the time I know he comes just to please me. When he used to come home on leave

from the Front it would have been ever so much jollier for him in town. A tiny village like this must have been frightfully dull for any one like Tony. But he never seems to think of himself."

As the girl chattered on, innocently revealing in almost every word she spoke, how much Tony meant to her, Carol began to feel as though she were an outsider, an intruder. The close, friendly intimacy between the two was so evident. And it seemed as though, for Margery, Tony symbolised everything that was good in life.

"You think a tremendous lot of him, don't you?" said Carol at last, baldly. Each word the girl uttered stabbed her like a knife-thrust.

Margery turned upon her eyes that shone like stars in their radiant, confident belief.

"You would, too, if you knew him as I do," she answered quietly. "I think if Tony ever came—came below what I've thought him, it would kill me! Sometimes, you know, I've felt as if I just couldn't go on—the world seemed all black, and I was too big a coward to face it. And then I've remembered how plucky and splendid Tony is when things are difficult." She paused, then added with a little dreaming note in her voice: "He's always been like a white, shining light to me. Like—like Christ on His Cross."

Carol's chair grated sharply on the floor as she got up and pushed it suddenly back.

"I—I think I must go now," she said abruptly. "Your mother will be expecting me." Then, as Margery looked up in some surprise at the unexpected movement, she stooped over the girl and kissed her. "I'm glad you have had such a good pal in Tony," she said gently. "It must have meant a great deal to you."

"Yes. It means everything," answered Margery with simplicity.

As Carol descended the wide staircase the strains of a

lively fox-trot were wafted up to her from the ball-room. The dancing had begun, then! Conscious of a sudden violent distaste for the lights and the sound of music and gay, light-hearted laughter which she knew would greet her when she entered the ball-room, she turned hastily aside and made her way into the deserted library. A low fire still burned in the grate, and drawing up a chair she sat down and stared into its dying embers.

Her talk with Margery seemed to have altered the entire perspective of things. Before that, she had hardly realised the full significance of what she and Tony were about to do. That their friends and acquaintances would judge them both and condemn, she knew, but it had seemed a matter which concerned themselves alone. If they chose to face the obloquy of the world in order to secure their happiness, they were surely at liberty to do so. And now, now she began to wonder if they were! Was any one ever really free? Were we not all so linked together that no one of us can sin without hurting some one else?

If she and Tony went away together, Margery would be left with her young, loyal faith and belief shattered into fragments. What was it she had said that Tony symbolised for her? "A white, shining light!" "Like Christ on His Cross!" Carol repeated the words below her breath. And she—she was to be the one to drag Him down from it, to rob this child, who had so little, of the one thing that mattered—her unshaken belief in all that was good!

And there was something else, too, something which Carol had vaguely sensed but against which she had striven to shut her eyes. Margery was the woman Tony loved, although, blinded by his eager sympathy for her own unhappy life, by the appealing glamour which inevitably surrounds a lovely and unhappily married woman, he had not yet realised it.

But Carol had realised it. When she had seen them together just now, *she had known.* Her own love for Tony

had shown her clearly that what he felt for her was not love itself, but that pity which is so much akin that it sometimes gets mistaken for it.

She never knew how long she remained alone by the slowly-dying fire, fighting the biggest battle of her life. But when at last Tony came in anxious search of her, and found her there, her decision was taken.

"I've been hunting everywhere for you," he said, switching on the light and advancing into the room.

She smiled faintly.

"Have you, Tony?"

Her eyes rested upon him rather wistfully as he stood there under the blaze of the electric light. He looked so young and strong and splendid—a lover of whom any woman might be proud.

"Yes. Everything's ready. We'd better dance a bit—show ourselves in the ball-room. It will help to put people off the scent."

"I don't think it matters," she said slowly.

He stared at her.

"You don't think it matters?" he repeated.

"No. Because—because I'm not coming with you, Tony, after all."

She told him then—told him why she couldn't go. Her voice shook a trifle as she went on, but her eyes were steady.

"Margery loves you, Tony—and so I want you to marry her and make her happy. She deserves to be happy. I don't. And I believe that you—care for her. What you feel for me hasn't been really love—it's been a little glamour and romance and—and a lot of pity, Tony dear."

Tony's face was rather bitter.

"And your feeling for me? I suppose that, too, has been just 'a little glamour and romance'?" he asked harshly.

For a moment she was silent. Then she gave an odd little laugh and lied courageously.

"Yes. I suppose it has," she said.

"That settles it, then."

He turned aside, ashamed of something within himself that leaped at the thought of freedom. Then he realised that Carol was speaking again—speaking of his marriage with Margery.

"It would be a 'make-believe' marriage, but what else can there ever be for her? And you—you've been her make-believe saint——" Her voice rose hysterically. She felt her control deserting her. It was all so funny—so funny! With an effort she recovered herself. "But if you married her, Tony, she'd be utterly happy just because she was your wife."

He swung round towards her. She must know the truth—know the full value of the gift she was bestowing.

"It mightn't be a 'make-believe marriage,'" he said slowly and distinctly. "Didn't you know? That London surgeon who came down to see her the other day is absolutely sure he can cure her."

Carol caught her breath. Margery's happiness would be more complete, even, than she had thought.

"Still"—she forced the words through stiff lips—"still, I want you to marry her, Tony. I'm—I'm going back to Bruce."

. . . . . .

There was a light under the study door. Carol could see the vivid golden streak of it as she stood in the dusk of the faintly illumined hall. Then—then Bruce had changed his plans and had returned to-night! That meant he must have found and read the letter she had left for him, telling him she was going away with Tony. She had left it on his study table, propped up against the inkstand. She had intended to destroy it now—destroy it so that Bruce need never know how nearly he had lost her.

She wondered what he would do, now that he knew she had really meant to leave him? She didn't suppose for one

moment that he would be heartbroken—he must have ceased to care for her in that way very long ago. But he would be furiously angry. Pride and jealousy combined might drive him to almost any extreme. Perhaps he would thrust her out of his house—at once, in the dark of Christmas morning, while the dawn was still quivering low down in the east. There would be something grimly ironical about it, if he did. Or perhaps—her eyes fell on his hunting-crop, with its long leathern thong, which hung near the door, and she shivered a little. For a moment she was tempted to hide it—Bruce in one of his ungovernable tempers was scarcely responsible for his actions—and she lifted it down from the peg on which it hung. Then a certain dogged courage made her replace it. With a small, white-lipped smile she turned away and opened the door of the study.

Bruce was sitting at the table. Under one hand, flung out across the polished surface, lay the letter she hed left for him. His face was hidden on his arm. He made no movement; apparently he had not heard the light sound of her entrance.

She was conscious of a sudden rush of pity as her eyes fell on the broad, bowed shoulders. There was something so forlorn, so utterly desolate, about that big, lonely figure. She crossed the room to his side and touched him gently on the arm.

"Bruce, I've come back," she said.

He looked up. His face was drawn and haggard, scarred with intolerable grief, and as he raised himself she caught the metallic gleam of a revolver gripped in his hand.

"Oh, my dear! Did you care—like that?" The words broke from Carol in low, shocked tones. She had not for one instant thought of him as hurt or grief-stricken, but only as violently angry.

"Did I care?" he said in a queer strained voice. "God knows I cared! I suppose *you* didn't know. I haven't be-

haved much as though I cared, have I?"—with a wry smile.

"No, you haven't," she answered with the direct simplicity which grows out of crises.

"No," he acknowledged. "I haven't. I've been a brute to you, Carol. And yet, when I was in my right mind, I loved you as other men love their wives. It's my cursed temper that's done it—that and the devil in the whisky bottle. I suppose—I suppose it's too late now to start again." He glanced at her with a kind of dull surprise in his face. "Why did you come back?" he asked curiously.

She responded to the question with another.

"Do you want me back, Bruce?"

"Do I want you back?" he exclaimed violently. "Does a hungry man want bread?"

She moved a few steps nearer to him.

"Then, if you want me, I'll stay."

"You'll stay?" He stared at her incredulously. "Do you mean you'll give me another chance? You'll forgive?"

She smiled a little.

"It doesn't seem to have occurred to you that I nearly ran away with another man."

"Small blame to you if you did"—tersely.

She shook her head.

"Two blacks don't make a white. They never did and they never will." She paused. "Bruce, do you realise that it's Christmas Day? Suppose we each make the other a present of forgiveness—give each other another chance and start fresh?"

He made an involuntary movement towards her, then checked himself.

"Do you know what you're offering?" he asked roughly. "It won't be all plain sailing, you know. My temper isn't cured just because I want you, and it'll take a devil of a long time curing. And I don't suppose"—with a rather cynical little smile—"that I've taken a sudden distaste for

the stuff in the bottle, either. There'll be ups and downs to face, my dear, before I can pull round. Are you prepared to go all the way with me?"

Carol looked at him with level eyes.

"All the way, Bruce," she answered steadily.

He drew in his breath sharply. Then his arms went round her.

"It's a pretty big Christmas present," he said.

And somehow Carol knew, from the way he said it, that he would not let the gift be given in vain.

CHAPTER XV

THE THIRD ACT

Dear Sir,

I regret that I shall be unable to undertake any further typing for you until after the election, as I have promised my services during that period to one of the candidates. Trusting that I may again have the pleasure of typing your manuscripts when the election is over,

Yours faithfully,

A. M. Little.

The foregoing brief communication was beautifully typewritten and the signature appended in a very neat and methodical-looking handwriting.

Terence Dyke frowned disgustedly as he perused it. Miss Little was the typist *par excellence* who had, for the past five years, wrestled successfully with the rather illegible scrawl of his manuscripts, and her defection at precisely the moment when his first play was ready for transcription was aggravating in the extreme.

For a few moments Dyke remained staring at the unwelcome missive, his thin, eager face clouded over with a kind of half-humorous dismay.

"Oh, hang!" he muttered irritably, ruffling his crop of brown hair with a boyish gesture. "Oh, hang!"

Then, thinking it just possible that Miss Little might be able to put his play through before the election swallowed her up, he moved towards the telephone.

But Miss Little's answer to his appeal was uncompromising.

"Very sorry indeed, Mr. Dyke, but it's quite impossible. What? Oh! Can I suggest some one else? Yes, there's a Miss Grey I know, who is just starting work as a typist. What? Oh, yes, thoroughly trustworthy and very anxious to get on. *Grey,* not Graham—Miss Prudence Grey." And then followed the address.

Reluctantly Dyke packed up his precious manuscript, and enclosing with it a curt little note of explanation, dispatched it to this new and untried source.

Prudence Grey—it was rather an attractive name, he thought, as he addressed the package. He could almost sense a whiff of lavender and the whispering rustle of flowered brocade as he repeated the little name aloud, while a whimsical smile curved his sensitive mouth and disturbed for a moment the dreaming quiet of his imaginative hazel eyes.

Prudence Grey! Well, he hoped she would prove a little more business-like and up-to-date than her old-world name suggested, since it was important that his play, "Expiation," should be quickly and carefully typed.

The manager of the Wanderers' Theatre was prepared to produce it, provided that Decima Gale, his leading lady and one of the first emotional actresses of the day, considered the star part sufficiently starry to add lustre to her name.

Hitherto Dyke's literary career had jogged along at an even and unexciting pace, supplying him with bread and butter and even with a few luxuries, but he looked to this latest piece of work to earn him the coveted laurel leaves of actual fame. He had put the very best of himself into it, and he was convinced that the play was good above the average. If only it appealed to Decima Gale, his success was assured! And at thirty years of age the prospect of success is very sweet, especially to a man like Terence Dyke who has worked hard for some years without achieving it.

Within four days of its dispatch the manuscript of "Expiation" was duly returned, but as Terence fluttered the typewritten sheets through his fingers his face lengthened with

disappointment. The typing was badly done, and had been subjected to many alterations and erasures, while on more than one page the lines displayed a regrettable tendency to deviate from their appointed straight and narrow path.

Suddenly, as he was comparing an inaccurately copied phrase with the text of his original manuscript, he caught sight of a few words pencilled in the margin towards the end of Act III. He read them aloud, slowly and with considerable amazement—for it is certainly no part of a typist's duty to comment upon the author's ideas! Most writers, indeed, would be disposed to accept such comment in much the same spirit as the butler might be expected to receive any suggestions concerning his office that emanated from the kitchenmaid!

Marcia would never have taken it lying down like that (ran the impertinent scribble). *No woman would. It's tame of her—third act, too!*

For a moment wrath and indignation submerged every other feeling in Terence's bosom. Then—for he was an honest craftsman—he began to ask himself whether the gratuitous criticism held any germ of truth enfolded in its gentle ridicule.

"Marcia" was the heroine of his play, and the hero, having certain sins both of omission and commission on his conscience, and being desirous of making atonement for the same, had resolved upon a form of expiation which involved Marcia's happiness in addition to his own. And Marcia, hitherto depicted as a very modern and vital young woman, had suddenly caved in and agreed to the immolation of her happiness with an almost Early Victorian meekness and resignation. The typist's finger had pointed out the one weakness of an otherwise delightful play.

Terence acknowledged this to himself frankly, but he could not quite subdue a certain soreness of spirit as he reflected that it had remained for a little, unknown typist—

and a very inferior one at that!—to detect a flaw in his characterisation which he himself had failed to observe.

The situation was not without its humour, however, and there was a twinkle in his eyes as he sat down and indited the following brief epistle:

Dear Madam,

Possibly you are a better critic than typist. What would you have done had you been Marcia?

Yours faithfully,

Terence Dyke.

He hardly expected to receive an answer, but Miss Prudence Grey was apparently quite undaunted by the slur cast upon the results obtained in her legitimate field of labour, and she launched forth into constructive criticism *con amore.* Within three or four days Terence received a badly-typed but exceedingly well-expressed outline of Miss Grey's conception of Marcia's attitude, and at the foot was added a malicious little thrust in pencil:

If you'd been a woman you would have known all this without telling.

Terence grinned to himself. He saw very clearly the force of the suggestions contained in the brief sketch. They betokened a tenderly humorous insight into the workings of the feminine mind, and the vivid, impetuous style of writing was instinct with a vitality that irresistibly conveyed itself to him, imbuing him with fresh creative impulse.

It was as though he had been groping in the dark and some one had suddenly held aloft a flaming torch, illuminating all that had been obscure. To Terence's vision, Marcia's character took on a new aspect, glowing with fresh life and colour; he felt an intimate knowledge of the manner in which such a woman would have acted in the given circumstances of the story, and his pen flew along at racing speed, depicting with sure, unfaltering strokes the woman

as he now envisaged her. And when, at the end of a six hours' stretch of work, he flung it down, he was aware that he had doubled the value of his play.

If he had had any doubts about it, they would have been swept away by the enthusiastic reception accorded it by the manager of the Wanderers' and by Miss Gale herself.

The latter was frankly delighted with it, and said so, her small hand with its firm, sensitive fingers gripping Dyke's arm impressively, while the beautiful blue eyes she lifted to his were ablaze with ardour.

"It's fine, Mr. Dyke," she declared. "It will make you—and me, too."

Terence, pleased and excited, beamed back at her.

"You are already made, Miss Gale—but if my play satisfies you, then I'm sure of its success."

"Well, it does," she returned seriously. "I never thought it was going to be half so good."

The following weeks passed in a whirl of work and rushing excitement. Rehearsals of the play were soon in full swing, Decima Gale was enchantingly kind to its author, and Terence lived in a state of exaltation that turned the grey old workaday world into a paradise of rose and gold.

Blakely, the manager of the Wanderers', was equally as confident of success as his leading lady.

"It's going to be an annual income to us all, my boy," he prophesied cheerfully. "Best thing you've ever done by a long way. That third act's a corker—and that's what's going to fill our pockets. The rest of the play's mere framing; Act III's the jewel."

And Act III had been inspired by Prudence Grey!

Terence felt a sudden rush of gratitude towards the unknown woman who had set him on the right track, irradiating his third act with the tender luminance of her thought, and, now that he had received a favourable verdict, he determined to share the good news with her and beg her to let her name appear with his as part-author of the play.

His conscience—always a very sensitive and over-developed portion of his spiritual anatomy—assured him that if the chief asset of the play lay in the third act, then it followed that he was not entitled to the whole credit—nor even to the whole cash—that might accrue from its production.

In this particular instance his conscience had doubtless been stimulated into abnormal activity by a certain glamour of romance with which his imagination had enveloped Prudence Grey.

Unknown, hiding behind her prosaic task of typewriting, there lived and moved a woman who had instinctively understood all that he was aiming at in the character of Marcia, and that such a woman must be immeasurably attractive he felt convinced.

A man is always disposed to idealise the woman who, wittingly or unwittingly, has acted as an incentive to him in his work and Terence had endowed Prudence Grey with all the vivid charm and passionate womanhood which were the attributes of the "Marcia" she had inspired.

It was therefore not without a little thrill of pleasurable expectancy that he set out for the rather obscure neighbourhood indicated by the address which was stamped in purple ink on the back of Miss Grey's manuscript.

He found the place with some difficulty, and after mounting endless flights of stone steps, stood at last outside a door bearing the legend:

Prudence Grey, Typewriting Bureau.

His quick imagination got to work, conceiving the kind of woman he was about to meet. She would be tall, he thought, and her hair would be nut-brown, with warm red lights in it. He was sure she must have red in her hair—first because he loved hair that glinted to a ruddy sheen in the sun, and second because he had sensed in her writing the impetuous

warmth of temperament that so often accompanies that colouring.

And then a voice invited him to enter, and he walked into the room.

It was a small, high-ceilinged chamber, furnished in a bare and meagre fashion with three straight-backed chairs, some alphabetically lettered shelves—presumably intended for the reception of manuscripts, but now yawning in empty desolation—and a desk on which stood a typewriter that bore an unmistakably new and little-used appearance.

A woman who was seated at the desk looked up as Terence entered and bade him good morning in a thin, reedy voice from which the vibrant note of youth had long since departed. She was a small, grey-haired woman. Her complexion had that curious waxen quality frequently bestowed by chronic ill-health, and beneath the skin of her temples a little tracery of delicate blue veins was faintly visible, emphasising the faded colour of her eyes—eyes of soft, misty blue, like that of an old Wedgwood bowl, and now peering at him a little nervously from behind the spectacles perched upon her nose.

Terence paused doubtfully on the threshold of the room.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I called to see Miss Grey."

His eyes wandered round the small apartment as though he suspected Miss Grey of being concealed behind one of her own chairs.

"Yes?" replied the unyouthful voice. "I am Prudence Grey. What can I do for you?"

"*You?*" The word escaped Terence almost before he was aware. This peaky, withered little person in spectacles—Prudence Grey? It was inconceivable! Prudence Grey must be—*must be*—young and ardent, glowing with vitality and charm. How else could she have written that throbbing, passionately alive delineation of a woman faced with the utter loss of her love and happiness?

This shrivelled, dried-up ghost of womanhood must have

long ago forgotten the glorious thrill and glamour of love in the parched and arid years of spinsterhood that lay behind her. "You are Miss Grey?" stammered Terence.

"Yes. What can I do for you? You have"—a faint flicker of hope sprang into the tired eyes—"some manuscript that you wish typed?"

"No—I mean yes," said Terence, correcting himself with a sudden consciousness of his inability to quench that eager light. "I have, heaps. I'll—I'll send them on to you." Mentally he decided that several long-discarded short stories that had suffered from home-sickness in the earlier and less successful stages of his career should be retyped and given a fresh start in life. "But I really called to-day to see you regarding some work you undertook for me before. My name is Dyke—Terence Dyke," he added in explanation.

"Oh, yes. Wasn't it"—anxiously—"wasn't it satisfactory?"

"Oh, yes, *quite,*" he replied hastily. "But, you know, you did so much more than an ordinary typist and—er—gave me the valuable assistance of your criticism."

Miss Grey flushed a little and peered at him through her spectacles.

"Oh, yes," she said. "The—the bureau does occasionally exceed its duties, I'm afraid. It's the interest we take in our clients' work that leads us astray." There was a delightful little air of pomposity about the way she referred to "the bureau"—rather as though it were a hierarchy of angels brooding over the footsteps of the aspiring author. "I—I trust," she added with a sudden descent to the level of a somewhat flustered fellow-mortal, "that you didn't consider it too officious—that you didn't resent our suggestions?"

"No—oh, no!" he assured her warmly. "They were most helpful. How"—curiously—"did you come to think of them?"

"*I?*"—stammering and blushing. "*I* think of them?" Suddenly a flash of humour gleamed in her eyes. "I ask

you, Mr. Dyke, do I look the sort of person to—to think of things like that?" She did not, as Terence grimly appreciated.

"But—but—then, who was it?"

"It was the young lady who took charge of the bureau in my absence. I was away for a week; I had influenza."

Terence's heart gave a throb of relief. Then the wonderful woman who had inspired the reborn "Marcia" was a living, breathing reality after all, and not this forlorn little relic of a bygone time!

"And the name of the young lady who was in charge?" he suggested.

Miss Grey shook her head.

"Ah! I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to tell you that," she answered primly. "She is not a typist by profession, you see. She only obliged me for the time being—under the cloak of the bureau, as it were."

Nor could all Terence's eloquent persuasion prevail upon her to enlighten him further.

"But—don't you see?" he exclaimed at last in despair. "I'm really greatly indebted to this lady. I want to thank her."

"The bureau is very glad to have been of service, Mr. Dyke," she replied with immense dignity. And there, perforce, the matter ended. There was no getting behind the shutters of the bureau.

It was but human nature that the mere fact that there were difficulties in the way of his tracing this unknown typist should arouse in Terence an obstinate determination to discover who she was and all about her.

He inquired in every likely and unlikely direction, and now and again discreetly worded advertisements appeared in several of the daily papers. But the *"lady typist who had criticised the third act of a certain play"* and who was invited to *"communicate with T. D."* remained obstinately silent, discreetly veiled in mystery.

Weeks passed, and as the time approached for the production of his play Terence found himself so fully occupied with the hundred and one details which demanded his attention that the matter of the unknown typist inevitably slid into second place. He still wondered about her at odd moments, still regretted that he could never repay the good turn she had done him, but he had at last accepted the fact that his search for her was unlikely ever to prove successful.

And, as the one woman slipped gradually into the background of his thoughts, another woman stepped into her place—Decima Gale the actress, who so vividly realised the part of "Marcia," and all that her creator had dreamed into it, that it was a perpetual delight to him, during rehearsal, to stand quietly by, watching her every gesture, listening for each inflection of her beautiful voice.

The first night of the play came at last—a sheer triumph for both author and actress. The house rose at him when, in answer to persistent calls of "Author," Terence at last showed himself in front of the curtain, bowing his acknowledgments, and it was then that the remembrance rushed over him once more, in overwhelming force, of the woman to whose influence and inspiration he owed this indisputable success.

Half deafened by the roar of the applause, his eyes roved questioningly over the sea of white, upturned faces. Was hers among them, he wondered? Somehow, he felt sure that if she were anywhere within reach, she would have come to the first night of "Expiation."

Rather thoughtfully, and with bent head, he retraced his footsteps into the wings, to be greeted by a message that Miss Gale was waiting to see him.

He hurried to her dressing-room—fragrant with the sheaves of sweet-scented flowers offered at the shrine of the popular actress—and her congratulations, tendered with a curious little air of diffidence, set the seal upon the evening's triumph.

"But why so serious?" she rallied him, as he thanked

her gravely. "The play might have been the most ghastly frost, to judge from your expression!"

Terence hesitated a moment, then something in the frank, kind friendliness of the blue eyes that were searching his face, drew the whole story of the manuscript of "Expiation" from his lips, and he blurted out the truth.

"I feel," he said, "an absolute humbug."

Decima Gale looked at him oddly.

"So that's what's worrying you, is it? I don't fancy"—with an amused smile—"that most successful dramatists would think twice about the 'ghost' who had lent a hand."

"I don't see how any one could do otherwise," he replied simply. "Here am I reaping both the laurels and the cash, while all the time, the real creator—the inspiration—of that third act is getting nothing out of it. Don't you see"—irritably—"it puts me in a horribly false position?"

"And you've no idea who—or where—she is?"

"None. I've done my utmost to trace her. I—I should like to collaborate with her, you know. By heavens!"—kindling—"what parts we two would create for you, Decima!"

As he spoke, his voice must have betrayed his secret to any but the most dull and love-blind of mortals—and the woman with whom a man is in love is rarely to be included in that category! Decima flushed a little, and a soft shining grew in her eyes.

"Perhaps," she suggested, "she—your unknown, I mean—might not feel quite so enthusiastic about creating parts—for me."

"I think she would," he answered. "You see, she must understand your type of woman so well—or she could never have inspired 'Marcia.'"

"Supposing"—Decima's fingers were busy stripping the petals from a rose—"supposing I told you that I know who she is—and that she is reaping her harvest just as much as you are?"

He regarded her with bewildered eyes.

"But—how could that be?"

Miss Gale looked back at him consideringly.

"The leading lady"—she paused delicately—"won't do so *badly* out of this play, you know!"

"What?" Terence stared at her, incredulity struggling with the dawn of comprehension. "Do you mean to tell me—that you, *you* were the typist?"

She nodded.

"Yes. Poor Prue—Miss Grey, you know—is my old governess, and she had no sooner opened her 'Typewriting Bureau' than she fell a victim to influenza. She had just obtained your work through Miss Little, and she was so fearfully upset, poor old dear, at the idea of losing it that I undertook to do it for her. And when I saw how you were blundering over 'Marcia,' I—I simply couldn't resist putting my finger in the pie." She looked at him apologetically. "The play was so fine, Terence, so splendid, except for Marcia's behaviour in the third act. And I felt I *knew* just what Marcia really would have done—and what, inside yourself, you really wanted her to do."

Terence's eyes glowed.

"Of course you did," he said simply. "Because—you *are* Marcia, the woman I wanted out of the whole world of women. I thought I should never find her, so I just drew her as I imagined her to be. And then you came along, and showed me what she would really be—and it was something so infinitely more than I had guessed! Decima"—he held out his arms—"now that I have found her—my woman out of all the world—you won't take her from me again?"

She went to him then, simply and straight as a homing bird.

"No," she said, "I won't take her from you, because—oh, my dear, she doesn't want to go."

CHAPTER XVI

HIS BROTHER'S KEEPER

1

IT was a good thing the foundations of Little Croft had been well and truly laid. The hurricane of wind sweeping across the moorland fairly howled round the sturdy, square-built house, tearing at the eaves, and shaking the heavy oaken doors as though it sought to uproot it bodily from the solid earth on which it stood, while rain and hail, driven before the gale, rattled against the window-panes like miniature gunfire.

"Beastly night!" observed Colin Trenby, leaning forward in his chair to poke up the fire. "Pity any one who's out in it."

A man of six-and-thirty or thereabouts, seated on the other side of the wide, old-fashioned hearth, glanced up indifferently.

"I shouldn't imagine there *is* any one. The moorland folk have sense enough to go in out of the rain." And his eyes fell again on the pages of the book he was reading.

"Then you're jolly well mistaken!" exclaimed Colin, jumping up to his feet. "There *is* some one out in it. Do you hear that?"

"That" was the hoot of a motor-horn, repeated urgently several times, and sounding close at hand, and the next instant, during a momentary respite from the uproar of the wind, came a hurried tapping at the window. In a couple of strides Colin had reached the door, and was out in the square hall into which it opened, and a minute later came the grating noise of bolts withdrawn, and the creak of the

heavy outer door as it swung wide, followed by a confused murmur of voices, one of them unmistakably feminine.

"I couldn't make any one hear." The voices drew nearer. "So I told my chauffeur to tootle the horn while I rapped on the window. I was determined to get in *somehow*."

"I should think you were!"

Colin had begun some eager answer, but the man within the room paid no heed to it. He had risen quickly to his feet, startled by a curiously familiar note in that other voice —the rippling, flute-like voice which crossed and mingled with Colin's. A fleeting look of annoyance—almost, it seemed, of apprehension—passed over his face, and his eyes went swiftly to the figure which preceded Colin into the room. Sex, feminine—and for the moment that was practically all that was discoverable. A green, fur-edged motor-cap, pulled well down on to the head, and the big fur collar of a similar green leather coat, between them almost entirely concealed the newcomer's features, while high Russian boots meeting the flounce of fur which edged the coat completed the costume. A flash of topaz-golden eyes between thick lashes, and the tip of a rather impertinent little nose was about all the outward woman visible.

"This is Miss Verity Daryll, of the Cosmopolitan Theatre," began Colin eagerly. "Her car's broken down. Miss Daryll, let me introduce my brother Simon——"

"I think we've met before." But there was no welcome in the man's grave voice.

Miss Daryll pulled off a gauntleted glove, and held out her hand.

"Why, of course we have!" she replied. "At the Sacheverels', wasn't it? I hope you don't mind my taking refuge here from the storm?" She spoke airily, but an observant ear might have detected the faintest note of defiance in her tones. Colin, however, was far too enraptured at the moment to be observant.

"He'll be only too charmed, Miss Daryll," he assured her

eagerly. "He's rather an old stick-in-the-mud"—with an affectionate glance at his brother—"but he means well."

In spite of a certain family resemblance of tone of voice and gesture, there was a marked contrast between the two Trenbys, and Miss Daryll's glance went curiously from Colin's clean-cut young face, with its gay blue eyes and fair hair with the rebellious kink in it that no amount of ferocious brushing would subdue, to that of the elder man—lean and rather saturnine, with grave grey eyes, and a mouth that closed in a straight, unyielding line.

"You're thinking we're not a bit alike?" said Colin quickly, interpreting her questioning glance. "But you see, we're only half-brothers—not the real article at all. Though it doesn't make a bit of difference to us, except in the shape of our noses. Does it, old chap?"

Simon Trenby's eyes softened oddly as they rested on the boyish face. It was obvious that this young stepbrother of his, fifteen years his junior, meant a good deal to him.

"Don't you think," he suggested, "that it would be rather more useful at this juncture if you helped Miss Daryll out of her motor-coat and ordered tea, instead of discussing the fine points of our relationship? Meanwhile," he added, turning to the visitor, "I'll go and see what can be done about your car."

Verity nodded and proceeded, with Colin's assistance, to disembarrass herself of her heavy motor-kit, emerging slender and delightful in the latest thing in frocks, riotous with embroideries in apparently every colour under the sun, and belted with a sash very low down on her hips. Accepting one of Colin's cigarettes, she curled herself up in the chair Simon had vacated, and proceeded to expound with much cheerfulness the series of mishaps which had culminated in her unceremonious onslaught upon the windows of Little Croft.

"I don't know what we should have done if we hadn't happened across your place. We'd lost our way, and the engine was knocking like a steam-hammer, while the floor

of the car resembled a pond more than anything else. Does it usually deluge like this in your part of the world?"

"Not often," replied Colin. "This is about the worst storm we've had for the year. All the same," he added audaciously, "I've no complaint to make against this particular tempest."

"Nor have I." Verity smiled back at him enchantingly. "Only I'd like to let the unfortunate friends who were expecting me know that I've found refuge here. They'll be wondering what's happened to me. Of course you've no telephone?"

"Of course we *have*. Phone them that you can't get to them till to-morrow."

She hesitated.

"You can't, you know," insisted Colin. "Even if Simon and your chauffeur get the car into working order, you can't possibly turn out again on a night like this. It's perfectly respectable," he added reassuringly. "We've an old gem of a housekeeper who stands for all the proprieties rolled into one."

Verity burst out laughing.

"I don't think that point would have bothered me much. And it's awfully good of you. I'll be thankful to stay if—if your brother doesn't object."

"Simon! Of course he won't. Why, you're quite old friends, aren't you?"

"Hardly that," she submitted. "We both stayed at the same house once for a week-end. And frankly"—with a fleeting smile—"I don't think he particularly liked me."

"Nonsense!" protested Colin stoutly. "He couldn't help liking you. No one could."

"Thanks so much. Well, let's say he disapproved of me, then."

It was some time before Simon returned from investigating the trouble with the car, and when he did it was to discover Colin and Verity consuming unlimited quantities of

tea and hot buttered scones, and apparently on the very best of terms with each other. A burst of gay young laughter over some ridiculous joke or other synchronised with his entrance. He was suddenly conscious of feeling old—old and tired.

"I've given my housekeeper orders to prepare a room for you, Miss Daryll," he said rather stiffly. "Your car can't be put in running order before to-morrow, and in any case you couldn't possibly face this storm."

Verity glanced up at him from under lids shadowed with faint purple.

"I'm sorry to be such a nuisance," she murmured.

"Not at all." But there was no cordiality in his disclaimer, and Colin, flashing a quick look of protest at his brother, enthusiastically protested his satisfaction over the contretemps which had procured them the pleasure of Miss Daryll's company.

At dinner she appeared radiant in another creation, of gold and green tissue, which she had extracted from her suit-case. She had extracted other things too, to repair the ravages effected by wind and rain, and her strikingly pretty face was made up to look, if not prettier, at least more striking than nature had intended. Simon took in at a glance the darkened brows and lashes, the faint mauve shadows that deepened the setting of her eyes, the scarlet lips that were quite frankly and rather adorably the delicately pencilled work of a lipstick. A veiled scent emanated from her vicinity—something Eastern and elusive, that made you think of rose-leaves and sandalwood and moonlit gardens, and desperately sweet music. . . .

"Do you take mustard?" Almost savagely Simon pushed towards her the little silver mustard-pot that stood with its salt and pepper brethren betwixt his plate and hers.

"Not with soup, thank you," she replied meekly. And Simon, with a muttered ejaculation, hastily substituted the pepper, and relapsed into angry silence.

But his silence had apparently no power to damp the enjoyment of the other two. They squabbled happily over the salted almonds, which they both adored, argued heatedly over the latest dancing-steps, and discussed everything they could think of from the probable date of the end of the world to the origin of the Blues. And all the time Colin hardly took his eyes off Verity's charming face, and equally she pretended to be totally unaware of the fact.

After dinner she sang to them, playing her own accompaniments, snatches of song from the various musical comedies in which she had appeared. Simon sat listening with bent head and unsmiling mouth, and not even the most provocative of her little songs, sung with that same grace and impertinence which nightly packed the Cosmopolitan Theatre from floor to ceiling whenever she was playing there, gave him the least apparent enjoyment. On the contrary, he seemed relieved when the evening came to an end, and jumped up with alacrity to light Miss Daryll's bedroom candle for her. Meanwhile, Colin stood murmuring extravagant boyish compliments in her ear.

"You must come and see me in London," she answered him charmingly. "We open next month—a topping new musical comedy, *The Chrysanthemum*. Don't you"—she glanced round the old, oak-raftered living-room—"don't you ever come to town?" Then, her glance taking in the essential "rightness" of Colin's evening kit: "You look as if you did."

He nodded.

"We gravitate between Mount Street and this place. At least, I do. Old Simon digs himself in here most of the year round."

"Ah! But how foolish!" She bestowed a brilliant smile on Simon. "How foolish to—to vegetate like that!"

"You think so?" Simon parried the smile bluntly. "I'm afraid I can't agree. I find nothing to attract me in London."

The next morning, amid a burst of sunshine and a flurry

of farewells, Miss Daryll departed, smiling above the armful of flowers which Colin had rifled from the greenhouses right under the irate nose of the dour old gardener.

"Colin, I want you a moment." Simon laid a detaining hand on the boy's arm.

"Yes, old man, what is it?" Colin answered abstractedly. His thoughts were really with the big touring car which was carrying Verity Daryll away along the ribbon of road that crossed the moors.

For a moment Simon did not speak, but stood staring down into the fire. Then he said slowly:

"Look here, Colin boy, cut the Cosmopolitan out of your scheme of things. Will you?"

"What do you mean? Why, Miss Daryll has asked me to go and see her there."

"Precisely. Don't go."

Colin was up in arms in a moment. It was absurd, monstrous, behind the times to talk like that. Oh, yes, of course, he knew his brother had a down on actresses, but nowadays they were amongst the most charming of women, and welcomed everywhere. Did he wish him—Colin—to become an absolute back number? Et cetera, et cetera.

"I'll ask you one question," said Simon at last. "Do you suppose Miss Daryll would have invited you to come and see her if she hadn't known you were pretty well endowed with this world's goods?"

Colin blustered.

"How could she know? She happened in here quite by accident."

"Quite." Simon's expression was non-committal. "But she'd met me before at the Sacheverels', and you're as well aware as I am that Mrs. Sacheverel knows the amount of our income to the last half-penny. And what Mrs. Sacheverel knows, all her friends and acquaintances know. Take my word for it, Colin, a successful actress like Miss Daryll would have no earthly use for a young man with empty pockets."

But Simon's warning fell on very stony ground. The production of the new musical comedy at the Cosmopolitan Theatre found Colin installed in the Mount Street house, and it was very soon known to all those whom it concerned—and to a good many whom it did not concern at all—that in the evenings young Trenby was generally to be found in Miss Daryll's dressing-room, while during the day she was constantly seen driving with him in his car or lunching or supping with him at the most expensive places in town.

2

"Will you come this way, sir?" A trim parlour-maid ushered Simon into the room, pausing in the doorway to add: "Miss Daryll is not down yet. I will tell her you are here." Then she vanished, leaving him to take stock of the room in which he found himself. It was very much of the type that he had expected it would be. Plain wall-paper with a frieze of absurd purple camels trekking across a scarlet desert, futurist rugs on a polished floor, while neutral-coloured chairs and divan served as a background for black cushions splashed with rich-hued embroideries, on one of which sprawled a black and white pierrot doll, its long legs straggling limply. The piano, chimney-piece, and any other available space appeared crowded with signed photographs of theatrical celebrities, boxes of cigarettes and chocolates, and big bowls of flowers. In the place of honour stood a large new photograph of Colin.

Simon crossed the room to examine it, and stood for a few moments regarding it thoughtfully. The boy had altered during the last few months, he thought. The blue eyes had hardened a little. They were more experienced eyes, and the mouth held a shade of recklessness. While he was still staring sombrely down at the photograph, the door flew open and Verity entered the room. She was wearing a thick silk Chinese kimono, gaily embroidered in what appeared to

Simon to be a combination of cherry blossom and brilliant-hued fireflies. Her hair was loosely knotted in a great bronzy coil at the nape of her neck, and between her fingers she held a cigarette. Apparently she had been interrupted in the process of manicure, for while one hand was tipped with vividly pink nails, those of the other gleamed rather anæmically by contrast. She started as she caught sight of Simon.

"You!" she exclaimed in surprise. "I thought it was Colin. The maid only said 'Mr. Trenby' was here, so of course——"

"Of course. He's such a regular visitor, isn't he?" observed Simon.

"Well—yes, he comes here pretty often." The golden-brown eyes shot sudden defiance at him. "Do you object?"

"Yes," he returned bluntly. "I do. That's why I've come to see you."

Miss Daryll regarded him with a faint, enigmatical smile.

"Well, you're frank, anyway," she said, seating herself on the divan. "Won't you sit down—and have a cigarette? If it's to be a prolonged *séance* we may as well do it comfortably."

Simon sat down but declined the cigarette, and as though deriding his curt refusal, she herself lit another from the stump of the one she held and delicately puffed a cloud of smoke into the air. Then she humped the cushions more comfortably together at her back and regarded him quizzically from between narrowed lids.

"Well?" she said helpfully.

Simon hesitated.

"First of all," he said at last, "I want to know if it's true that you've promised to marry my brother—to marry Colin?"

She nodded.

"Perfectly true."

"And may I ask why?"

Verity's eyes widened.

"Why? Well, why does one usually promise to marry any one?" she drawled.

"For a variety of reasons. Sometimes for money, sometimes for position, sometimes merely to annoy other people——"

He paused, and Verity put in swiftly:

"And sometimes—for love. You've left that out."

"Yes. I've left that out," he answered. "Was I wrong to leave it out?"

Beneath the direct inquiry of his glance she flushed and looked away.

"Was I?" he repeated steadily.

"I don't think I'm called upon to give you my reasons for marrying Colin," she returned. "After all, they only matter to him, don't they?"

"No," he said abruptly. "They don't. They matter to me, because Colin matters to me, more than anything in the world."

"And you don't like actresses, do you?"—mockingly.

"No, I don't."

"You showed me that—quite clearly—when we met down at the Sacheverels'." Something, resentment or anger—or was it merely pain?—smouldered darkly in her eyes.

He threw her a quick glance of interrogation.

"And is it because of that—because of that—you are determined to marry Colin?"

"I don't like being snubbed, Mr. Trenby. I'm not used to it." The answer came back like a rapier-thrust. "But, do tell me"—with a resumption of her usual nonchalance—"why don't you like actresses? We're quite nice—really."

He was silent a moment. Then:

"Yes. I'll tell you," he said quietly. "I don't like actresses because it was an actress who ruined my father's life. She was Colin's mother, and my father simply worshipped her. And before Colin was a year old she had run away with another man—an actor—and returned to the

stage. Not even motherhood"—his voice deepened—"could hold her. It broke my father—I was just old enough to understand it. He was never the same man again, and when he died, five years later, he left Colin—Colin whom his mother had deserted—in my care. And I want to save him from being broken as my father was broken. . . . He's—he's only a kid, and doesn't know yet what—love—means," he added.

"But all actresses don't run away. Lots of them leave the stage when they marry, and become patterns of domestic respectability."

"Once an actress, always an actress. The footlights always call, and you'd go back to them. Because"—quietly—"you're not in love with Colin, and love is the only thing which would make the sacrifice of your career worth while."

"You're quite sure I'm not in love with Colin?"

"Quite. And that's why I've come to you to-day to make you an alternative proposal."

"A proposal?" There was a curiously uneven note in Miss Daryll's voice and a faint shell-pink crept into her cheeks.

"Yes"—composedly. "If you will agree to release my brother from his engagement to you, I propose to settle two thousand a year on you."

The shell-pink vanished suddenly and in the dead whiteness of the face she turned towards him her eyes gleamed like frosty stars.

"So"—she said slowly. "You think I'm to be bought! You're offering to—to buy me off?"

"You put it very crudely," he returned.

"It was a crude offer."

"It was a reasonable offer. Marriage with a man of Colin's means has other sides to it than"—cruelly—"the merely romantic one. You're a woman of the world—nearly seven years older than Colin—and I was speaking to you as such. Need we wrap up the real significance of this interview?"

Verity jabbed the end of her cigarette down on the black Wedgwood ash-tray and extinguished its glowing tip.

"And I suppose," she said in a high, rather strained tone of voice, "it hasn't occurred to you that Colin may have no desire to be 'released,' as you call it?"

"Certainly it has. But it would be up to you to deal with that side of the matter—to cure Colin of his infatuation. That would be your part of the bargain."

She sprang to her feet with a swift, fierce movement of supple limbs.

"Which I flatly decline to carry out! You can keep your two thousand a year, Mr. Trenby, and I"—her eyes flared defiance at him—"will keep Colin."

Mechanically he had risen to his feet when she did, and now he stood looking down at her, conscious of an odd surprise and bewilderment. He had been so sure that the money would tempt her, but, in the face of her flat refusal of his offer, he was beginning to wonder if he had utterly misjudged her. With his ingrained prejudice and hostility to all her kind he had assumed that Colin meant no more to her than a financially satisfactory settlement in life. And now —now he was asking himself if, after all, she *really* cared for Colin?

He remembered his first meeting with her. They had both arrived by the same train at a little wayside station in Devonshire, and shared the same car, sent to meet the expected guests, on the fifteen-mile run from the station to Sacheverel Park. At the time he had had no idea of his fellow-traveller's identity, and there had been something about her —a frankness in the golden-brown eyes, a certain simplicity underlying all the sophistication evident in the finished detail of her toilet and her careful "make-up"—which had attracted him. Afterwards, when his hostess had formally presented him and he learned that his companion of the journey was the leading lady at the Cosmopolitan Theatre, he had experienced a violent reaction, and throughout his brief visit he

had deliberately avoided Miss Daryll whenever politely possible and, when it was not, opposed a chill indifference to her friendliness. Then, later, a storm across the Yorkshire moors had brought her to the threshold of his own door, and his distrust of her type of woman had leaped into new life, to be justified by the way in which she had immediately, and apparently without effort, annexed his brother and attached him to her chariot wheels.

But if she really cared for Colin, so much so that she was actually prepared to renounce the stage in order to marry him, then he had misjudged her terribly and, at the thought, he was conscious of an odd conflict of emotion. The thing affected him with a strange poignancy—at one stroke it both gave him back the woman he had first met and known and took her from him irrevocably.

"You don't seem to understand——" Her voice had hardened and now drove harshly across the current of his thoughts. "You don't seem to understand that marriage with Colin is a much better proposition for a woman like me than a mere two thousand a year—without marriage."

A wave of swift revulsion swept over him. He had been right, then! He had not misjudged her at all. She was as coolly calculating, as predatory in her instincts as any other woman of the adventuress type—capable of assessing Colin's value as a matrimonial proposition to the last farthing. And beneath the grim satisfaction he felt at the correctness of his earlier estimate of her, beneath the fury of contempt her frank self-seeking awakened in him, he was aware of a curious sense of disappointment.

"So," he said, and the scorn in his voice cut like a sharp blade. "So it's marriage you want—marriage and money combined. Nothing less will satisfy you?"

Unable to meet his eyes, she shook her head mutely. A bitter silence fell between them, bleak and biting as the iron-grey silence of an ice-bound winter night. At last, after what seemed an interminable length of time, he broke it.

"Then—marry me."

"Marry—you?" She repeated the words after him doubtfully, as though uncertain if she had heard him aright.

"Yes. Well?"—as she still hesitated. "What do you say to it?"

"But why—I don't understand. Why should you ask me to marry you when you've just been doing all you can to prevent my marrying Colin?"

"That's why. I don't want you to marry Colin. He's got all his life before him, and—I want him to be happy."

"And you think that would be impossible—with me?"

"I do. That is why I'm offering you the alternative of marrying me. I'm the elder. From the point of view of this world's goods I'm better off than Colin—much more worth your powder and shot, if you only knew it."

She winced at the brutal frankness of the speech, but recovered herself swiftly.

"I can't say I care for your method of making love," she said, and her long, brown-gold eyes challenged him mockingly.

His own kindled, seeming to catch fire from hers, and he made a sudden impulsive step towards her.

"Don't you?" he said unevenly. "Shall I try—another way?"

For a moment a queer, breathless silence held them both. The atmosphere was suddenly electric, charged with an emotional tensity which gripped both the man and woman. Verity's hand went involuntarily to her breast. Her lips moved, but no words came. Then, as though some live wire had snapped between them, Simon gave a short laugh and drew back.

"You should have all the money you want," he went on in the same cool tones as before. It was as if that suddenly tense moment had never been; a door, ajar for an instant, had closed again between them. "And all the freedom. I

don't care a damn how you treat me—but leave Colin alone. . . . Well, is it a deal? Will you marry me?"

Verity's foot tapped restlessly on the ground. Her head was downbent so that he could not see her face. At last, however, she looked up, her expression enigmatic.

"Yes," she said. "I'll marry you."

"And you'll——" He paused, then finished with a faint smile: "You'll—disenchant Colin?"

She regarded him a little sadly.

"Hasn't it occurred to you," she said, "that the mere facts of the case will disenchant him fast enough? After to-day, he will think of me—just what you think. And with more reason. He is"—her voice trembled the least little bit—"very like you in some ways."

. . . . . .

Colin took it badly. There were only two things clear to his blazing young indignation. At one and the same moment his brother and the woman with whom he imagined himself in love had let him down. The scene betwixt him and Verity in the gay little room, with its purple camels and multi-coloured cushions and floppy, straggley-legged pierrot, was short and bitter.

"Simon was right about you, then," he flung at her. "I jeered at him and called him 'Simon Pure,' but, by God, he knew your kind of woman better than I do. He's welcome to you"—savagely. "And I hope he's pleased with his bargain."

Verity caught her breath. She wished she could tell him that he was misjudging his brother horribly. For herself, it didn't much matter what Colin thought. Nothing mattered.

"You don't understand, Colin," she said. "You—you couldn't. But—some day——"

"No, I certainly don't understand." The boyish voice was raw-edged with a fierce contempt that hurt right down

somewhere in the depths of him. "And I hope to heaven I never shall!"

He marched out of the room without looking back at her once, and for quite a fortnight the world was compact of dust and ashes and Colin a confirmed misogynist. After that, seeing that it was his boy's pride that had been hurt rather than any more vital part of his spiritual anatomy, convalescence set in.

3

Verity's charming brows drew together as she pored over the letter she had just received. It was headed "Little Croft" and written in Simon's decided, clear-cut hand, and, boiled down to its residuum of fact, it conveyed the news that he had lost practically his entire fortune in the big bank failure which had recently surprised the whole financial world.

I am now a comparatively poor man (he wrote), *and that being so, I can no longer presume to hold you to your bargain to marry me. You are free—free to marry Colin if you wish. Probably you think this is a poor sort of gift I am giving you—merely the husk and not the kernel. But the freedom I give you back is a real freedom. I could not give you less than I took from you, and as soon as it is humanly possible I will see Colin and tell him that I, and I alone, am to blame for your refusal to marry him. His share of our mutual inheritance, by the way, is quite intact, having been more fortunately invested than my own.*

The wording of the letter was curiously stiff and formal, so formal, indeed, that Verity smiled a little to herself. It made her think of a small boy who has tumbled down and cut his knees, but proudly assures every one, in rather unsteady tones, that "it doesn't hurt a bit, thank you."

The letter produced two immediate results. It procured

Miss Daryll's understudy the chance she had been waiting for during many fruitless months and sent Miss Daryll herself to the other end of England as fast as the midnight train could thunder its way northwards.

It was early in the morning—to be accurate, at precisely 9 a.m.—that a rather uncertain tapping on the window-pane distracted Simon's attention from his matutinal eggs and bacon. For, even though banks may fail, eggs and bacon still command an Englishman's attention at nine o'clock in the morning.

The tapping carried his thoughts vividly back to a certain storm-ridden night three months—or was it three centuries?—ago, and he frowned irritably.

"Oh, damn!" he muttered, because it isn't nice to find that your nerves are playing tricks with you, and Simon had found this two or three times during the course of the last few days.

Then the tapping came again, sounding too definitely on this occasion to be accounted for by jumpy nerves. He looked across at the window and saw her standing there, and before he knew what he was doing he had leapt up, thrown the window wide, and lifted her clean over the low sill into the room beside him.

"Verity! Verity!"

Then he remembered, and his arms fell to his sides.

"What are you doing here?" he asked dully.

"It's my place to be here. It's any woman's place to be with the man she's going to marry, when he's in trouble."

He nodded.

"Yes. It would be—*if* we were going to be married and *if* we were ordinary man and woman."

"I'm quite an ordinary woman," she said. "You've never believed it, but actresses are—awfully like other women, Simon, dear." She smiled—a queer little tremulous smile. "They're ready to stand by their men just as other women do."

"I don't think you've understood. I'm a poor man, now, Verity. Little Croft is all that is left to me."

She looked round the old raftered room with eyes that were very soft.

"I'm glad they've left you Little Croft," she said simply. "Two people who—who loved could be very happy here."

"Verity"—his hands gripped her shoulders, forcing her to face him—"Verity, what do you mean? 'Two people—who loved'? . . . You wanted to marry Colin."

"Yes." Her head drooped. "Because—just because he was so like you, Simon. He reminded me of you in a dozen different ways—it was almost your voice that spoke sometimes—your laugh. And I thought you would never care for me. You hated actresses so much. For you we were all tarred with the same brush—heartless, just squeezing all we could out of life, like Colin's mother. Oh, it wasn't fair, Simon—you can't judge people like that. . . . You see, I cared from the very beginning, when we first met at Sacheverel Park, and I had a feeling that you might have cared, too—only you wouldn't let yourself——"

"No," he said, "I wouldn't let myself."

"And afterwards—afterwards"—with a hint of tender mockery—"you were so busy taking care of Colin that you forgot all about yourself. Even when finally you *did* ask me to marry you—to save Colin—you still distrusted me completely, and you were so horribly rich that there was no way of proving to you that I loved—just you. But now——" She broke off and came quite close to him. "Simon, dear," she said, "do you think you could ever learn to love me—and trust me, too?"

With that the last barrier went down, and he caught her up in his arms.

"I think," he said, "it would be the very easiest thing in the world."

THE END

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